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# The Battle of Algiers and the Dictatorship of Truth: How Crillo Pontecorvo Used Film as an Illusion to the Reality of a Dying Colonialism

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*The Battle of Algiers* and the Dictatorship Of Truth:  
How Gillo Pontecorvo Used Film  
As an Illusion to the Reality  
Of a  
'Dying Colonialism'

By

Caitlin Gardner

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Submitted in partial fulfillment  
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# Chapter 1 Introduction: Influences in Form and Narrative

## I. Illusions of Reality

Chapter 1 "This dramatic re-enactment of *The Battle of Algiers* contains

*NOT ONE FOOT of Newsreel or Documentary film.*"

-Disclaimer in the opening credits of *The Battle of Algiers*

This disclaimer was subsequently featured in the American viewings of *The Battle of Algiers*. "This is not a legal disclaimer," writes Mary Patten. "Instead it calls attention to the way the film was made: to the *closeness* of the space between "documentary" and re-imagined and remembered cinema vérité."<sup>1</sup> It gives the audience the impression that such closeness of real footage and a re-imagined re-enactment of the same event can be so close and indistinguishable that there is no telling what you think is real versus staged without a disclaimer. According to film critic and Pontecorvo biographer Irene Bignardi, this film subsequently was given the disclaimer after the 1966 Venice Film Festival after a few American directors approached Pontecorvo suggesting to add a disclaimer for audiences as they had a hard time believing no such footage was used in the film. The film's depiction of certain scenes was considered so believable that the film needed such a disclaimer to inform its audience those scenes were not real-life footage from a news source or a documentary.<sup>2</sup> Subsequently, the film's American distributor used the disclaimer at the beginning of the film.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Patten, Mary. "What Is To Be (Un)Done: Notes on Teaching Art and Terrorism." *Radical Teacher* Number 89 (Winter 2010): pp. 9-20. p. 9. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Bignardi, Irene. "The Making of *The Battle of Algiers*." *Cineaste*. 25.2 (2000): pp. 14-22. p.22.

<sup>3</sup> Bignardi, p. 22.

How could this be confused? Can a film be so effective in the style it creates that it can fool a spectator of what is real versus re-imagined? Can a director's narrative choice and strategy really make a film that does dramatize, re-enact, and re-stage an event really be taken for the real thing? Why do a lot of spectators assume that an image can appear so real that it cannot possibly be done as a re-staging? What compels us to believe that a dramatization or a re-enactment in film or any other visual medium lends itself as lesser than that of 'real' news footage? There are certainly moments as a spectator where you find dramatizations to be so well done that it could actually believe it to be real. But when we find out these were re-staged why do our minds immediately turn to find any little detail on screen to confirm our new doubts? Why does the power of cinema's illusions lead us to want to want us to remove the gray area of real versus re-staged? This is not to say the disclaimer for *The Battle of Algiers* was added or used with the purpose of removing the gray era. If anything the film's director Gillo Pontecorvo, and the film's chief cinematographer Marcello Gatti, had ultimately succeeded in "The Dictatorship of Truth".

What is "The Dictatorship of Truth"? For Pontecorvo it was to give the impression to the audience that despite this film being a work of fiction, that it could leave an impression that it was a documentary or contained elements of a newsreel. Grainy photography and footage was intentionally done to give the film this aesthetic, seen as crucial to the film winning over its audience with a film that looks very real rather than a film so different, a film that they have never seen before, according to Pontecorvo.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> "Pontecorvo: *The Dictatorship of Truth*". Dir. Oliver Curtis. Radiotelevisione Italiana, 1992. *The Battle of Algiers*. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. Criterion Collection, 2004. DVD. Disc 2.

Naturally, there is the belief and expectation from an audience that there is more truth in the news footage than within the structure of a full-length feature film. It is not just the elaborate design, set pieces, and staging that the audience imagines necessary to re-enact or dramatize for a real event but also the ideas behind that filmmaker as opposed to a videographer or documentarian. We expect the director in the re-staging to have bias or a point of view that is explicit. We expect that director to withhold or embellish the truth. We expect something manipulative that pulls at our emotional heartstrings to get a reaction.

In the case of the documentarian, there are expectations for an unbiased, journalistic exploration of their subject. We expect a carefully conducted anthropological study of the subject matter with a video camera.

Often forgotten is how in the infancy of the movie camera during the 19<sup>th</sup> century seeing the real-life was a form of entertainment for people. As noted by Dean W. Duncan<sup>5</sup>:

“In its earliest years (approx. 1895–1902), film production was dominated by actualities, short pictures of real people in real places. Comprised largely of two categories—the travelogue and, more substantially, the industrial-life portrait—these films favored an unmediated view of the world over arranged spectacle. Though they gave way in popularity to the narrative fictions of Georges Méliès and Edwin Porter, they continued to be produced in great number.”

Those same people behind the camera observing the everyday life also began to take control of what they were filming. Auguste and Louis Lumiere went from *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (Arrival of the Train at the Station) (1895) to doing in that same year another short of a dancing skeleton on strings in front of a black backdrop in

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<sup>5</sup> Duncan, Dean W. "Nanook of the North." *The Criterion Collection*. The Voyager Company, 11 Jan. 1999. Web. 16 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/42-nanook-of-the-north>>.

*Le Squelette Joyeux* (1895). Surely there were also films that worked as a hybrid of shooting the everyday through staging and embellishments.

Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) is a documentary about the Inuit people in their everyday life still taught today in the discipline of documentary films at schools and universities. It is perhaps the most influential documentary ever made, and among the most important. At the time it infused the two main ideas listed by Duncan, being the travelogue and detailing the life of the Inuits. Yet *Nanook of the North*'s distinction as a documentary today has been considered quite dubious.

*Nanook of the North* was just as sharply edited and staged as any silent film at that time. The documentary's first shots are skillfully constructed, giving the illusion to the viewer in one scene that multiple people, including an infant and a dog were all coming out of the same kayak. Think of that scene as the clown car act at the circus. Each person who came out of that kayak was all in a separate shot. Flaherty used tricks that included editing and the necessary title cards for a silent movie in between the cuts to hide that fact. The scene was not to show how impressive the kayak was as a means for transportation (though the Inuit left enough a positive impression on Flaherty enough to do multiple expeditions and films on them). It was just a light scene that was designed for audience laughs, a gag on par with the comedic geniuses of the silent era.

However, Flaherty did not stop there in terms of manipulating his subject in the name of romanticizing those 'simple' Inuits. He presented the Inuit people still using their traditional tools of hunting and fishing when the Inuits were very much in modern times, many of them were using guns to hunt. Never are the modern weapons shown but the Inuit hunter wielding a spear remains the trademark for the film.

There are other scenes of contrivances showing a people that were presented behind the times such as the Inuit Nanook (whose actual name was Allakariallak) biting a phonograph record, portraying Nanook as so completely unfamiliar with a modern invention that he could mistake it for food. Also, the camera that Flaherty uses, a standard camera for the period, had to have an igloo made specifically for Flaherty and the camera to shoot interior shots of the igloo that itself was not a whole igloo.

It should be noted Flaherty was not an ethnographer or specialist in anthropology. He was a prospector for the railroads, an explorer. His contact with the Inuits inspired him to shoot them on film. The documentary film itself was not fully realized genre in 1922. The film was made with an eye for commercial distribution and exhibition, and for audiences accustomed to narrative fiction films.<sup>6</sup> Flaherty was telling a story and arguably preserving a culture that was on the verge of disappearing. Dramatic storytelling rather than documenting and non-interfering with the subject by today's standards is not a documentary. But for the *Nanook of the North* the film is excused for its dated nature and limitations that has to be fully realized and considered in viewing the film. *Nanook of the North* is examined today by the illusions and narrative it created than as a serious study on its subject of the Inuits.

Melding both narrative and real-life together on film, as *Nanook of the North* demonstrated, was and still remains controversial. There was still discussion of what was superior filmmaking. Not long after the release of *Nanook of the North*, across the world there was a schism emerging in the Soviet school of cinema that pitted documentary and narrative film against each other. One of these figures involved would be Sergei Eisenstein, who would have a influence on Pontecorvo and political

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<sup>6</sup> Duncan.

filmmaking, in general. These films would have undeniable political themes, but it was the styles, techniques, and form of these movies that sustained themselves.

## **II. Political Film Language to the Masses in Narrative and Documentary**

Documentary versus narrative film would ignite into a two schools of theory between Soviet directors Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein. These two men were each enthusiastic toward their new country's ideals but their radically original film styles, film forms, and views of filmmaking could not be more different and still today are contentiously pitted against each other in the styles and form. This even as both men's politics were not only aligned but both of them would marry their politics to their films.

Vertov rose to prominence as the film movement in the Soviet saw "the boundaries between newsreels and documentaries get blurred" and offered his own unique style, gaining notoriety for how he, "mobilizes rapid montage, photographic trickery, expressive titling, and complex structuration [sic] with the aim of transforming the intellectual and perceptual lives of the viewer."<sup>7</sup> For Vertov the documentary was superior to a fictional film and that when he would shoot people it would ultimately be done with people unaware that they were being shot to preserve the "life as it is" or "life caught unawares" filming. The camera would be a human eye or 'Kino-Eye' or the 'Cine-Eye'. The choice by Vertov was as political as it was creatively driven declaring, "The film drama is the Opium of the people...down with Bourgeois fairy-tale scenarios...long live life as it is!"<sup>8</sup> Vertov would remain dogmatic in rejecting narrative

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Chapter 1 <sup>7</sup> Malitsky, Joshua. "A Certain Explicitness: Objectivity, History, and the Documentary Self," *Cinema Journal* 50.3 (2010). pp. 26-44. p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Dawson, Jonathan. "Dziga Vertov." *Great Directors* 25 (2003). *Senses of Cinema*. Senses of Cinema, Inc., 21 Mar. 2003. Web. 10 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/vertov/>>.



film.<sup>9</sup> Vertov wrote in 1923, “I am kino-eye, I am a mechanical eye. I, a machine, show you the world as only I can see it.”<sup>10</sup>

The camera was ultimately a tool that would record without any bias with Marxism as the only acceptable mode to have for analyzing what is recorded. Vertov considered his films documentaries but there was an undeniable poeticism to his movies. Through his technique and choices in how his film subjects were shot in vastly diverse camera angles and cut into certain montages, such as with his film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), there was something far greater than just capturing people on camera.

Vertov, despite his rejection of narrative filmmaking, would use intellectual montage, popularized by Eisenstein, in both symbolism from the political in showing laborers to cutting different shots based on the similarities in shape or even being meta in showing film within film or a camera eye looking back at Vertov’s camera. These examples, however, are arguably illusions that are made more noted and controversial in *Man with a Movie Camera* as despite featuring real-life people this film is taking place in a mythic city of the future, a Soviet ideal city that in actuality were three different cities in the Soviet Union. The film was a collage and a formal experiment of moments of people, people that would, Vertov believed, be making such a city a reality through their labor toward modernizing and industrializing the USSR. He would hope audiences would identify themselves in his film. The Kino-Eye was not just a visual aid but as a means for self-reflection in everyday life.

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<sup>9</sup> Dawson.

<sup>10</sup> Vertov, Dziga. *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov*, Trans. Annette Michaelson. University of California Press, 1985. p. 4

Vertov's legacy works have undoubtedly been influential for the direct cinema school, or commonly known as cinema verite, of documentary filmmakers, most notably Jean Rouch. Jean-Luc Comolli wrote in the film magazine, *Cahiers du cinema*<sup>11</sup>:

*"Thirty years after his time it became possible to apply Vertov's injunctions without any loss between the idea—to film everything, record everything, to be in life without disturbing or falsifying it—and its realisation."*

Vertov faced criticism from both a Soviet government that found his style inaccessible and from critics past and present. *Man with a Movie Camera*, in particular, is not even considered a film but as merely "a snapshot album".<sup>12</sup> Even those who considered Vertov an influence unlikely had or have the same level of zeal or Marxist tendencies and purity in their works. Vertov would defend his style and films by stating his overall objective was about "showing the truth".<sup>13</sup> However, it is undeniable that using the camera as the eye of everyday life remains an ideal if not a standard for documentarians and that Vertov's zeal built a major foundation for the documentary in global cinema.

The counter-point to Vertov's Kino-Eye or Cine-Eye came in the form of Sergei Eisenstein's Cine-Fist. His narrative filmmaking was, like Vertov's documentary filmmaking, was unconventional and groundbreaking. There would be no individual motivations that drove the film, rather a collective action of heroism and responsibility. There was also the audience element. Eisenstein eschewed traditional protagonists, further developing what he called the "mass-epical" – in which the masses rather than an

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<sup>11</sup> Dawson.

<sup>12</sup> Dawson.

<sup>13</sup> Vertov, *Kino-Eye*, p. 126.

individual hero drive events.<sup>14</sup> While Vertov concentrated on the camera as being the kino-eye of truth, for Eisenstein the audience is the “basic material” for his films.<sup>15</sup> Of Eisenstein and Vertov’s many arguments over documentary and narrative film, Eisenstein, perhaps too bluntly, declared that that, “It was not the Cine-Eye we needed but the Cine-Fist!”<sup>16</sup> Ontologically, for Eisenstein, the audience would be at the other end of his ‘Cine-Fist’. It was not to talk down to his audience but rather, that his works would be so powerful that it “sends the spectator into ecstasy”.<sup>17</sup>

Montage would play a significant role in demonstrating the grip of the cine-fist through a collision of time and space with images meticulously put together as a thesis and antithesis to create synthesis. This would most notably be in the form of intellectual montage, such as in the film *Strike* where the plight of workers are cross-cut to cattle being broken down, that made equivalencies and synthesized juxtaposing images that apart no such connection would be made. Other methods of montage would be cutting based on the emotional tone and overarching tone, tonal montage and overtone Montage, cutting determined by length, metric montage, and cutting determined by rhythm of the film, rhythmic montage.<sup>18</sup> Whereas Vertov would portray people in the everyday life in his montages, Eisenstein consciously constructed his montages to show conflict and contrast. This method of filmmaking for Eisenstein would work greatly in his subject

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<sup>14</sup> Kizirian, Shari. "October: The End of a Revolution." *Cinematheque Annotations on Film* 58 (2011). *Senses of Cinema*. Senses of Cinema, Inc., 13 Mar. 2011. Web. 30 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/cteq/october-the-end-of-a-revolution/>>.

<sup>15</sup> Eisenstein, Sergei. "The Montage of Film Attractions." Trans. Richard Taylor. *Selected Works: Writings 1922-1934*. Vol. 1. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010. 39. Print.  
Chapter 2 <sup>16</sup> Christie, Ian, and Richard Taylor. *Eisenstein Rediscovered*. London: Routledge, 1993. Print. p. 33

<sup>17</sup> Shaw, Dan. "Sergei Eisenstein." *Great Directors 30 (2004.) Senses of Cinema*. Senses of Cinema, Inc., 12 Feb. 2004. Web. 1 Oct. 2011. <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/great-directors/eisenstein/>>.

<sup>18</sup> Eisenstein, Sergei. *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. Trans. Jay Leyda. San Diego. Harcourt, 1969. Print.

matter that would become known as Soviet agitprop succeeding in the contrasting images in conflict in politically charged films.

Eisenstein's approach was productions that were largely political events that had occurred in the Soviet Union. His most famous film, *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) was about a 1905 revolt on a battleship against their officers and their Tsarist regime. *October: 10 Days that Shook the World* (1928) was based on the 1917 October Revolutions. These films had re-enactments that were so strong they could be taken as real, as in certain scenes in *October* that fooled the foreign press enough to use cuts of that as real film footage.<sup>19</sup> There were also the cases of re-writing history for Eisenstein. The most memorable scene in *Battleship Potemkin*, or in any Eisenstein film for that matter, is The Odessa Steps sequence that shows a massacre of innocent citizens at the hands of the armed Cossacks. This event never occurred.<sup>20</sup> Yet it is a scene that endures, even believed to have really happened, as a powerful exercise in Eisenstein juxtaposing and cross cutting images of violence of innocence amid chaos with close-ups of citizens being harmed versus the cuts of the Cossacks depersonalized to an army of shadows who commit the violent acts. It may not be fact-based but it is a great work of filmmaking and propaganda that is influential in its style and technique, though today, not for its political bent.

Both Vertov and Eisenstein became the intellectual faces of documentary and narrative film but in terms of film theory, film form, and techniques. Their politics and themes have not endured over time like their theories in montage. Ironically, their styles often got them in trouble with both the Soviet government and critics for being too

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<sup>19</sup> Kizirian.

<sup>20</sup> Dickstein, Morris. "Battleship Potemkin and Beyond: Film and Revolutionary Politics." *Dissent* Spring 58.3 (2011): pp. 90-95. p. 92. Print.

inaccessible to the masses yet today there are bits and pieces of Eisenstein and Vertov around the world today in many films and even television commercials. But as moment and spirit of the Soviet Union died the politics and ideology of those two films are merely memories and reminders of those moments.

### **III. The Style and Form Influences of *The Battle of Algiers***

*The Battle of Algiers* saw the documentary genre of cinema verite as a major influence, but largely concentrated on its aesthetics. To gain an audience's trust was to, through "The Dictatorship of Truth", was to appear as close to a documentary as possible through artifice grounded in film realism. Pontecorvo had worked as both a documentarian and photojournalist but what made him a filmmaker, that compelled him to buy a movie camera would be what he saw as the balance between the real and the cinematic, Roberto Rossellini's film *Paisan* (1946), a film of six unrelated stories and characters in cities across post-war Italy during the liberation period.

Films like *Paisan*, that restaged the Italian liberation and its aftermath with such stark immediacy of a newsreel and fostering illusions that events were unfolding voluntarily would serve as much as a stylistic template for *The Battle of Algiers*.<sup>21</sup> Rossellini and his films are arguably the most direct cinematic influence to Pontecorvo and *The Battle of Algiers*. The war had turn the apolitically naïve Italian Jew tennis pro Pontecorvo into a leading fighter in the anti-Fascist resistance and a man of the left. Rossellini's films in the war's aftermath turned Pontecorvo from a photojournalist into a man who wanted to direct.

Rossellini was a major figure in the Italian neo-realist movement in Italy's post-war

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<sup>21</sup> Matthews, Peter. "The Battle of Algiers: Bombs and Boomerangs." *The Criterion Collection*. The Voyager Company, 11 Oct. 2004. Web. 19 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/342-the-battle-of-algiers-bombs-and-boomerangs>>.

period. Born out of the post-war period, art and the spirit of resistance would give way to directors like Rossellini. There was little censorship and lots of creative freedom but much of the filming in the period required relatively little shooting in the studio, film stock bought on the black market and developed without the typical viewing of daily rushes, post-synchronization of sound to avoid laboratory costs, and limited financial backing.<sup>22</sup> The looks to these films were grainy, mostly black and white, with hand-held cameras but these were films beyond aesthetics.

Italian neo-realism was the expression of an entire moral or ethical philosophy of the post-war period. It was not simply just another new cinematic style. But as noted film theorist Andre Bazin would conceptually conclude, "Neo-realism as such," as a noun, "does not exist. There are only neorealist directors."<sup>23</sup> Rossellini's neo-realism, according to Bazin, would be his presentation of the events, a presentation that is at once elliptic and synthetic.<sup>24</sup> *Paisan*, in particular, succeeded in the complexity of Rossellini's image and its greater grasp of reality that, according to Bazin, was achieved by the amalgam of documentary technique and fiction.<sup>25</sup> It worked based on Rossellini's choice of non-actors and the settings of the real streets in towns of a crippled post-war Italy. *Paisan*, like its fellow *War Trilogy* films, *Rome: Open City* and *Germany: Year Zero*, have not just endured as some of the greatest works of cinema but as visual documents of the devastation in post-war Italy and Europe. This is also why Rossellini endures as one of the great filmmakers in cinema.

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<sup>22</sup> Cardullo, Bert, ed. "Introduction." *After Neorealism: Italian Filmmakers and Their Films; Essays and Interviews*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. P p. 3. Print.

<sup>23</sup> Bazin, André, "In Defense of Rossellini." Trans. Hugh Gray. *What Is Cinema?* Vol. 2. Berkeley: University of California, 1971. 99-100. Print.

<sup>24</sup> Bazin, p. 99.

<sup>25</sup> McCabe, Colin. "Paisan: More Real Than Real." *The Criterion Collection*. The Voyager Company, 26 Jan. 2010. Web. 06 Oct. 2012. <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/342-the-battle-of-algiers-bombs-and-boomerangs>>.

Pontecorvo openly said that his model director was “three-fourths Rossellini and one-fourth Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin and Alexander Dovzhenko.”<sup>26</sup> Despite the fact he had worked with several other Italian directors under the Italian neo-realism movement, and from time to time personally placed under the Italian neo-realist movement by critics, Pontecorvo owed his career to Rossellini’s brand of Italian neo-realism above any other director, film, or so-called genre. Rossellini’s style and aesthetics helped challenge the conventions of narrative cinema and ultimately, complimented the narrative of his own films. For Pontecorvo style would not just be cheap labor and equipment, as mentioned earlier the film’s grainy aesthetics were largely intentional artifice, but to make something appear to be real is melded with the film’s narrative.

*The Battle of Algiers* as a narrative film also does take certain elements of Eisenstein. Like Eisenstein, and to a certain degree Rossellini, the film has no central protagonist; Pontecorvo would refer to his large ensemble cast as ‘a collective protagonist... a chorus’.<sup>27</sup> This collective protagonist came in the form of the Algerian people. The collective struggle and unity against the forces of repression connected Pontecorvo’s collective protagonist and Eisenstein’s mass-epical of characters together in their narrative films. Pontecorvo knew that the movie’s cast of non-professional actors or a single protagonist was a dangerous novelty.<sup>28</sup> It was too unconventional and problematic. This brings us back to the “Dictatorship of Truth”.

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<sup>26</sup> Celli, Carlo. Introduction. *Gillo Pontecorvo: From Resistance to Terrorism*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2005. Pg. xxvi. Print.

<sup>27</sup> “Pontecorvo: The Dictatorship of Truth”, DVD.

<sup>28</sup> “Pontecorvo: The Dictatorship of Truth”, DVD.

Ultimately, “The Dictatorship of Truth” not only serves as a method to give an illusion to a film reality but its existence was to tie together the unconventionality of the Pontecorvo’s narrative for *The Battle of Algiers*. To see *The Battle of Algiers* is a work of fiction in the guise of a film appearing as realistic and conventional to win over its audience when the film itself in terms of narrative was not considered conventional.

Pontecorvo’s film style and narrative were a marriage of making a real historical event appear real again. But the film had an undeniable point of view that was political and it came from its unconventional narrative’s collective protagonist and their antagonist.

#### **IV. *The Battle of Algiers* as a Political Film**

Like Eisenstein’s ‘mass-epical’ lived repressed under Tsarist Russia or the capitalist system in his films, Pontecorvo’s collective protagonist were repressed under the French Colonial Empire. The French power over Algeria was unique in that the majority African Muslim Algerians had to live side by side with the minority White Europeans, many from France and other parts of Europe, known as the pied-noirs. Not unlike the white Afrikaans in South Africa, there was superiority, power, privilege, and alienating the Algerian majority. The relationship was toxic but the inequalities of colonialism were always present to an Algerian. The war would bring out the worst in the French military where torture of prisoners was widespread and the concept of having political prisoners ‘disappear’ was executed frequently. But Pontecorvo chooses not to create or place an evil face on a character or set of characters to portray the villain or villains for the film to raise his collective protagonist from their collective struggles to the audience.



The audience sees the tides of collective feeling move in a manner that is not so staged as *Battleship Potemkin*, but organic.<sup>29</sup>

There is a collective struggle but the film's antagonist is not the French military or the White European pied-noirs. It is the system of colonialism that had inhabited Algeria since 1830 that is the main antagonist in *The Battle of Algiers*. Colonialism is not personified in 'the bad guys' in the film in the way Eisenstein had characters personify the bourgeoisie to menacing levels in a number of his movies. If anything, the pied noirs and the French military are without a face. Colonialism is personified through characters like Ali LaPointe, who was a real-life major figure in the Algerian revolution, as a victim of colonialism. The failure and evils of colonialism are lived through him. There is an undeniable system of inequality and repression, where a born leader such as Ali LaPointe is also an illiterate street kid with menial employment who had been in and out of jail several times before the revolution.

In a rare intimate glimpse at a single character in the film, we see how Ali LaPointe gets radicalized. We see a close-up of Ali LaPointe that is then cut to an Algerian beheaded by a guillotine. We see or rather, see an imagined explanation for how an apolitical young man with no direction could suddenly join a radical group like the FLN. The audience sees the injustice right there with him. So where the film does not directly have antagonists that personify the menacing evils of colonialism, the struggles and repression of colonialism are clearly evident in the film. The film undeniably sees colonialism as wrong and is incredibly sympathetic to the Algerian cause and makes revolution not only justified but also an inevitable.

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<sup>29</sup> Dickstein, p. 92.

Irene Bignardi would argue that Pontecorvo saw *The Battle of Algiers* as a film to convince, “ the bourgeois cinema public that revolution, in certain circumstances, is a necessary thing”.<sup>30</sup> This film built on a style and narrative to create a reality focused on re-creating the political and systematic struggles that in the time period. *The Battle of Algiers* captured the moment of anti-colonialism and revolt in the third world, a political film like none other.

Political films are movies of the moment that give such films certain immediacy yet can also be its fatal flaw. These films have a particular topic of focus that can rapidly date itself as a result. Its point of view and its politics can also make it a polarizing film, limit and alienating its audience. Very few modern political films make money and few are made compared to other genres and focus in film because they are risky productions, and often are independent from the studio system- a far cry from the days of Eisenstein and Vertov when they had their films commissioned by the Soviet government.

Making a political film independently from major studio backing that offers political films a maverick sensibility but also gives the production significant limitations in telling their story, topic, and point of view on their story and topic. Essentially the political film relies on the drive of the filmmaker who will likely be risking financial and commercial worth because they really must believe in their subject at hand and know a fair amount about it to do a full-length feature.

But why do political films? Morris Dickstein believes it is a genre that offers endless possibilities based on what is involved in political filmmaking<sup>31</sup>:

“Filmmakers will always be drawn to politics because of its inherent drama but also because the stakes are so high: the fate of whole societies, to say nothing of the most

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<sup>30</sup> Bignardi p. 22.

<sup>31</sup> Dickstein, p. 95.

fundamental values, often hangs in the balance. But to make sense of this they need to resist the alluring conventions of thrillers, documentary imitations, and you-are-there newsreels, which offer a sure-fire channel to a popular audience. They would be wise to treat political issues not solely as advocates and agitators, exploiting the sensational, but as thoughtful witnesses, exciting or inciting the audience while also expanding its horizons.”

Political filmmaking is often unpredictable in the staying power of a film.

Nobody can actually predict that the moment captured in political film can sustain itself over time or quickly fades in its resonance. That would mean that the political winds of the times themselves are predictable which they are certainly not. For Eisenstein and Vertov both their themes are largely cemented in a historical context while it is their styles and form that are still studied and celebrated. It is not just a case that the themes are out of step with the contemporary world, especially in the case of Eisenstein, but it is no longer seen as acceptable to have a black and white, good versus evil theme that can be represented without heavy scrutiny. There are feelings that today’s political world is far more complex. Gillo Pontecorvo once spoke, years after he had made *The Battle of Algiers* (and only making two motion pictures after), about why there has been a decline in political filmmaking<sup>32</sup>:

“All of us who made so-called political films find ourselves in difficulty. In part because there’s a marked decrease in the public interest in social, collective themes in solidarity, etc.... there are fewer certainties and therefore less drive. This causes many people to distance themselves from this type of cinema.”

For Pontecorvo there was a moral, political, and philosophical certainty to believing and stating through film that colonialism was wrong and out of step with modern society. There also existed at the time a major public interest during the mid-1960s, in between the period of de-colonization and the rise of the anti-war period around

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<sup>32</sup> “Pontecorvo: *The Dictatorship of Truth*”, DVD.

the world that did appeal to made the film appeal to the public both bourgeois and the self-styled radicals.

*The Battle of Algiers* succeeds in that it is a risky film built on a style and narrative that puts it out there as something original. The film boldly portrays a system of inequality and repression in colonialism and by doing so, justifies a revolution and by extension, political violence and terrorism.

The colonial period has been over for decades yet *The Battle of Algiers* is still regarded as vibrant and fresh. If there are truly less certainties and more complexities today for political films today as opposed to when *The Battle of Algiers* was made, how has it remained so influencing as a political film? Foundationally, the narrative and style make it a unique feature film for its subject matter. Politically, the portrayal of repression and the portrayed endemic response to it, in terrorism and violence, is both visceral and philosophical. The lesson the film has, that systems of repression leads to an inevitable reaction against that system is a lesson not just exclusive to colonialism but a lesson in many real political and historical moments long after *The Battle of Algiers*.

#### **V. Conclusion to Chapter**

Films, whether documentary or a narrative film, can have similar styles and technique. When a documentary gives illusions that are labeled cinematic its status of a documentary is questioned, but what is there to say when a narrative film gives the illusion of something real? In the case of *The Battle of Algiers*, it is a film that has a certain narrative and aesthetic style to re-create a real political moment. Gillo Pontecorvo consciously made a film where it looks real because it happened. It is not traditional cinema or traditionally done narrative or storytelling. It is a widespread portrayal of a

nation in colonial revolt from a repressive, ever present system of colonialism that fails because it fails its people. As a political film it is remembered, analyzed, and celebrated today because its themes are timeless and its style and narrative film form make it original. It is both cinematic and bare bones, emotional and cool, harsh and beautiful, consequential and inevitable, and ideological and poetic. The film's influences in style and narrative from the earliest schools of film theory in both documentary and film and its greatest directors foundationally set apart *The Battle of Algiers* from the average, standard political film.

The making of the film itself would involve intense research and collaboration with somebody who was directly involved in the French-Algerian War, FLN leader Yacef Saadi. His memoirs would be adapted but his personal accounts and stories got assistance from the intense researching by Gillo Pontecorvo and his frequent collaborator, screenwriter Franco Solinas while making the necessary changes for their foundation of narrative, style, and themes. The foundation for the film was through this intense research and interviews of Algerians and French military people who experienced the war and with the writings of noted philosopher and thinker Frantz Fanon, whose anti-colonial literature is explicit throughout the film. Without these accounts of the Algerian repression would not be possible in serving the film to feel as real as it looked on-screen.

How *The Battle of Algiers* was put together, laid upon its foundation of style and narrative is further explained in the next chapter. How audiences, critics, and even countries received the film after its release critically will also be analyzed, both the supports and critiques, of the themes and narrative of the film. To what extent are certain perspectives shown are not shown and how have those perspectives of people

involved in the French-Algerian War depicted through film and how has the presentation of those perspectives and depictions changed over time. Finally, the themes and depictions that make *The Battle of Algiers* an enduring film will be analyzed. Many of these themes and depictions still profound and controversial today but what has made them so profound is how these themes and depictions also reflect today's geo-political climate though with different actors and certain differences.

# Chapter 2 How and Why *The Battle of Algiers* Was Made

## I. The Making of the Film: The Creative Team and a Direct Source

Italian neo-realism was a film movement that drove Pontecorvo into filmmaking. Filmmakers like Roberto Rossellini, Vittorio de Sica, and Luchino Visconti and many more came from working in the fascist era of Italian cinema to delivering gripping, real political (often leftist) films with incredible immediacy fresh into the post-war period. Film classics like *Bicycle Thieves* unveiled the extreme poverty, leading its poor character to prey on his fellow poor man that gave it a political drive in decrying inequality. Vittorio de Sica, director of *Bicycle Thieves*, explained why this filmmaking was happening, writing, “We strive to look ourselves in the eyes and tell ourselves the truth, to discover who we really were and to seek salvation.”<sup>1</sup>

While many directors would stay within Italy for their films, Rossellini with his War Trilogy took gradual steps in using neo-realism for the post-war period, as noted by French director Francois Truffaut, first a city (*Rome: Open City* (1945)), then a country (*Paisan* (1946)), and then a whole continent (*Germany: Year Zero* (1948)). Social truths of the period were realized and used as a response to the fascist period that held the world hostage. It was unsentimental filmmaking yet it was purer than any cinema out there for representing the social truths of the period.

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<sup>1</sup> Shiel, Mark. "Vittorio De Sica's Bicycle Thieves." *Italian Neorealism: Rebuilding the Cinematic City*. London: Wallflower, 2006. p. 100. Print.

Pontecorvo is not from this generation but he is also neither the next generation of filmmakers but rather shares overlap with both generations. He had lived through the time period of Italian fascism, a group leader in the Italian resistance of Northern Italy, and was politically active in the Italian communist party. It is not hard to understand why Pontecorvo would become so immersed with Italian neo-realism, watching those films had to draw from his own personal experiences and the experiences of his fellow countrymen on screen and the truthful way it was depicted he agreed with politically.

Many Italian filmmakers after Visconti and Rossellini such as Federico Fellini, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Bernardo Bertolucci were artists with interests beyond cinema, like Pontecorvo, but were followers and even students under these directors. Each initially began with films very grounded in presenting the social truths that owes itself to Italian neo-realism. Fellini, who co-wrote the screenplay to *Rome: Open City*, would move on to more artistic, glamorous, less reality based films and the same would be the case with Pasolini and Bertolucci. This was not to say that any of their films were less politically aware, intellectual, or critical of Italy. Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973) or Pasolini's *Salo* (1975) decried any nostalgia for the fascist period for Italy, but their restrictive discipline of the neo-realist aesthetic had been replaced with something broader.

Pontecorvo, however, would remain a strict disciplinarian on what neo-realism offered in the marriage of the social truths and the aesthetic power of making a film grounded in reality by using real people rather than actors, real settings and no considerable aspects of mise en scene, and cameras that could be held and composed to feel like the audience is seeing a documentary than a film.



Gillo Pontecorvo's rise in global cinema was not the most orthodox. Film did not become a strict discipline. Initially, he wanted to be a film composer and was very knowledgeable in the field of photography. After watching Rossellini's *Paisan*, Pontecorvo bought a movie camera and soon grew from making documentaries and short films to making feature length films. Most of these films would not gain any attention until years later, after Pontecorvo gained world prominence as a filmmaker. These early films, however, very much displayed a raw quality that Pontecorvo would soon fully tap into with *The Battle of Algiers*. Looking back at these films do show an evolving filmmaker and also mark an important creative collaboration that would make *The Battle of Algiers* possible.

Pontecorvo marked his first feature by working with Franco Solinas, his long-time screenwriting collaborator. Solinas co-write the screenplays of notable political films such as *Salvatore Giuliano* (1962), a film about the political and social upheaval on the Italian island of Sicily directed by Francesco Rosi, and *State of Siege* (1972), on urban guerrilla warfare in Uruguay, directed by Costa-Gavras. Pontecorvo's last feature film, *Ogro* (1979), would be the only film that Solinas did not write the script. Solinas was obviously a likeminded politically aware individual as Pontecorvo on political filmmaking as shown in his work independent of Pontecorvo. This is especially the case of *Salvatore Giuliano* that embraced the neo-realist approach and vigor of his directors that sought real locations and non-professional actors rather than sets, studios, and professional actors.

Their first film together, and for Pontecorvo his first feature-length film, was *The Wide Blue Road* (1957). From an aesthetic and stylistic point it is a stark contrast to *The*

*Battle of Algiers*; filmed in striking Technicolor and featuring well-known Italian actor at Yves Montand as the film's main character. The film tells a story about fishermen in an Italian village. The town's setting of the bright blue oceans and rugged countryside vistas is present and practically a character in the film, showing the benefits of filming in a real location rather than a studio.

The plot centers around a morally ambiguous fisherman named Squarcio breaking the laws of fishing by continuously catching fish by dynamiting the water, much to chagrin of the Italian coast guard who are on his trail throughout the film. The film's plot unfolds into a family melodrama but *The Wide Blue Road* partially achieves its realism in showing the audience the labor of fishing and the technique and routine that such a skill requires. There is also understated but undeniable political aspects to *The Wide Blue Road*.

The film portrays a group of fisherman who unite as one community against a fishing monopoly of one wealthy fisherman. The film carries political undertones of class warfare and scenes of labor meticulously filmed. Pontecorvo's personal background in documentaries with *Timiriazev Mission* (1953), about the floods in the Po Valley of Italy and *Bread and Sulphur* (1956), a portrait of Sicilian miners, certainly helped Pontecorvo represent the real-life scenes of labor in *The Wide Blue Road*.

Pontecorvo and Solinas continued their collaboration to make one of the first films that dealt with the realities of the Nazi concentration camps during World War II with *Kapo*. *Kapo* would be another exercise of the growing illusions of reality Pontecorvo strove for as a filmmaker. *Kapo* would gain acclaim as well as notoriety and controversy by highlighting an individual's entire Holocaust experience.

*Kapo* uses the illusions of reality created in capturing the camp experience and the systematic round up of Jews. The film begins with its main character, Edith, a naïve Parisian Jewish girl who impulsively runs to her parents' side as they are rounded up in a truck that ultimately takes them to a concentration camp. The realism to the film is through its aesthetically grainy, high contrast black and white footage. The crowd scenes, clearly influenced from Rossellini and Sergei Eisenstein, have crowd a certain precision and realness despite conveying a sense of chaos. But what gives it a neo-realist touch that distances the film from Eisenstein's dialectic films of montage can be traced to famous French film theorist Andre Bazin's essay, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage". Bazin argued that a long shot, a mark for several realist filmmakers, was more powerful than a fragmented number of short shots in certain filmic situations that preserve the time and space of reactions within the frame. *Kapo*'s tracking shots and wide-angle shots were largely uninterrupted, conveying a vastness of people and the various actions of the crowds on screen. The photography and cinematography were praised for its authentic feel. One critic wrote, "At times, it captures the illusion of authenticity so well that if not for recognizable actors in a scene, we might be looking at a newsreel."<sup>2</sup>

*Kapo*'s crowd shots are still a very remarkable sight for viewers. The amount of extras had to be in the hundreds. The sense of chaos, cramped atmosphere of the prisoners exiting the train cars, rushing for food, performing menial labor tasks, or living in the uncomfortable camp bunks were all shot with a fluidity yet conveyed a reality of

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<sup>2</sup> Koresky, Michael. "Kapo: Into Darkness." *The Criterion Collection*. The Voyager Company, 13 Apr. 2010. Web. 14 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.criterion.com/current/posts/1437-kapo-into-darkness>>.

desperation and hardship. Pontecorvo in this respect had successfully pushed forth the illusions of reality.

The story of *Kapo* revolves around its protagonist, Edith. Solinas and Pontecorvo chose not to show a victim in the collective tragedy of the Holocaust. Instead, Edith becomes a very complicated character, portrayed through the levels of loss, betrayal, conflict, and attempted redemption within the concentration camp experience. *Kapo* remains a fascinating film to look at through its avoidance of victimhood of the main character by rather showing some of the most painful moral and ethical conflicts for prisoners trying to survive. Edith goes from a victim who lost everything to removing her own Jewish identity as a means to survive by, with the help from fellow prisoners, gets a uniform with the black triangle and takes the identity of the prisoner, Nicole, a non-Jewish French criminal. As Nicole, Edith gradually moves up the ranks to become a Kapo, a warden for the camp that holds many political prisoners. She also prostitutes herself with German soldiers in exchange for food and other goods. Edith's behavior as Nicole turns her persona as a waifish, desperate, sad young girl turns into a direct, confident, cold young woman. Her political identity and sexual identity get transformed through this camp experience in addition to her Jewish identity being phased out as a means for survival.

In *Kapo*, the audience is given a pretty accurate depiction of the concentration camp experience for portraying honest, but ugly scenarios of conflicts and choices. But when *Kapo* moves further away from its aesthetic and collectivity to a single character encompassing all of these conflicts and ambiguities, the direction to a resolution for the film itself becomes a problem for the film.

Edith as a character either has to die for her 'sins' in the film or be redeemed in death or live with her guilt for what she has done to others. She is further dehumanizing herself in an already inhuman situation. Falling for a Red Army soldier Sasha, Edith becomes a pawn in the intended escape plan at the camp, though Sasha makes her aware of this plan and that she now must decide whether or not to end her life by shutting off the power to the electric fence. She goes through with it, becoming an inglorious, incidental 'martyr', when nobody but Sasha considers her human, as many prisoners try to escape and many die in the attempt. Edith's romance with Sasha is a crucial plot point that changes her back to her original self. The relationship is troubling for the film in how it served to turn her around, rather than being changed by the many instances of horrors she witnessed and took part in as a willing collaborator.

One horror in particular is when Edith witnesses a female political prisoner named Teresa running straight to the electric fence, dying instantly from electrocution. The scene itself takes on something in deep contrast to those realistic crowd scenes. The camera tracks in for a close-up of the electrocuted prisoner with her arms rising over her shoulders against the fence. Suddenly, the victimhood that was avoided by Pontecorvo with his main character reappears in this striking, single shot. Teresa, the character is a proud woman who refuses to be broken by the experience but compared Edith's transformation as Nicole, Teresa deteriorates. Teresa shares a final conversation with Edith that has her realizing what she has become, an animal. Edith declares Teresa's sage words on not being broken down to be useless as the camera zooms in on Teresa, who no values her life and runs to her death. So when the tracking shot moves up from

Teresa's dead corpse, it suggests that she is going to a much better place and that her character is too prideful to become an animal who would rather be dead.

The tracking shot in *Kapo* was incredibly controversial for the intent behind that shot. It was seen as intentionally manipulating the audience to get an emotional response. The problems that surround the tracking shot are how it is shot and how the post-production of the shot is framed for its audience. The dramatic music explodes into the scene as the way electric fence sparks when Teresa makes contact. The tracking shot moves in closer, but for what reason? An artistic flourish in camerawork with such a serious subject matter felt out of place with scenes of high realism shot earlier and after that scene. Jacques Rivette wrote in *Cahiers du Cinema* in reviewing the film wrote of the tracking shot<sup>3</sup>:

"Look however in *Kapo*, the shot where Riva [the actress who portrays Teresa] commits suicide by throwing herself on electric barbwire: the man who decides at this moment to make a forward tracking shot to reframe the dead body – carefully positioning the raised hand in the corner of the final framing – this man is worthy of the most profound contempt."

The French film critic Serge Daney wrote in his essay titled, "*The Tracking Shot in Kapo*", writing, "Pontecorvo neither trembles nor does he feel fear: the concentration camps revolt him purely on an ideological level. This is why he can make his presence felt in the scene with an extra pretty tracking shot."<sup>4</sup> Daney argues that Pontecorvo does not feel the emotional connection to the concentration camps based in morality, an incredible charge to make against any filmmaker. But the shot being used as an

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<sup>3</sup> Daney, Serge. "The Tracking Shot in Kapo." *Feature Articles* 30 (2004). *Senses of Cinema*. Senses of Cinema, Inc., 12 Feb. 2004. Web. 06 Mar. 2012. <[http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/feature-articles/kapo\\_daney/](http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/feature-articles/kapo_daney/)>.

<sup>4</sup> Daney, Serge.

emotional device for the audience rather than its main character may have been the biggest problem with the scene.

*Kapo* was on one hand seen as a breakthrough film told the concentration camp experience but on another hand still has faults in its story. Edith's redemption comes not from the horrors but from a human connection with a good-looking prisoner who catches her eye. It is not seeing the horror of the camp. It is not the people she meets like the character Sofia, the woman who helped Edith gain her new identity as Nicole, getting shot after taunting SS officers and prisoners after being considered medically unfit to work. It is not Teresa committing suicide after Edith tells her that her words are useless. The tracking shot of Teresa should have been meant for Edith not the audience to see. Instead the audience is pulled in by the tracking shot to get a reaction that was not meant for them but the main character.

Despite all of *Kapo*'s faults and weaknesses it was a work that gained Pontecorvo international attention as a director. The film earned an Academy Award nomination for Best Foreign Language Film. But the film for all of its breathtaking shots of the collective concentration camp experience stumbles over how Edith is no longer Nicole and why. Pontecorvo and Solinas show a genuine romance that they balance with factions of the camp who still see Edith as Nicole, inhuman and the enemy, but her attempt at redemption leads to an unromantic escape attempt by the camp. Edith's death becomes a footnote to a collective of people risking their lives to escape. Edith dies delivering a Jewish prayer but it feels like Pontecorvo wanted to have it both ways. When a film shows a great scene of a disorganized escape that has guns blazing and people running all over the place, you want to see more. Instead it cuts back to Edith

dying when the fate of these unknown prisoners who have escaped becomes much more compelling. The horrors and moral dilemmas of the concentration camp from Edith's point of view are quite fascinating but how she turns herself around through falling in love and her 'redemption' also make the film problematic in addition to other points in the film that take the audience out of a very realistic dramatization of the concentration camp experience.

After *Kapo*, Pontecorvo was said to get a film offer a week and refusing all offers in the process. The de-colonization of Africa and around the world was happening around this time. World geography was changing before their eyes. Solinas and Pontecorvo were especially drawn to the unfolding dramatic events in Algeria. What appealed to Solinas and Pontecorvo were the ideological implications in defeating colonialism and empires. Solinas and Pontecorvo saw a Marxist struggle in the national liberation and were sympathetic to it. Making a film about the struggles in Algeria became the follow-up to *Kapo* that would be years in the making before production even began.

Pontecorvo and Solinas whether fearlessly or recklessly or both, traveled to Algeria posing as journalists to gain access in order to capture the moment. Their trip occurred in 1962, with the March cease-fire and Evian Accords on May 18<sup>th</sup> coming forth there was relative tranquility. They maintained contacts with the FLN that allowed them to approach people to interview and walk around certain zones at the center of the conflict. The men would also make trips to Paris to interview paratrooper veterans of the war and important French officials. Material was collected and studied until finally, they agreed on a timeline for a film. It would take place between 1954-1957, the time of the



Battle of Algiers, rather than the final victory that did not interest either. Solinas and Pontecorvo decided to place the film in Algiers rather than the Aures Mountains, where much of the war took place, because the Battle of Algiers was a decisive battle that influenced a lot of public opinion within Algeria and outside of Algeria. This battle, led by the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN), led by an underground vanguard, managed to galvanize and stimulate the will of the Algerian people even though the FLN was defeated.

Their first story was titled *Para*. *Para* was to tell the story of a French veteran of Indochina turned journalist goes to Algeria to do a story for his French magazine, attempting to embed himself with the most reactionary forces of the SOA (Secret Army Organization) in order to capture the moment of Algeria. Its protagonist would have a moral awakening for the wrongs committed by the paras against Algerians. The originality they saw in the movie was not a heroic story but a story about the birth, rise, and fall of the FLN where the defeat of the Algerians in the Battle of Algiers was ultimately supplanted by an underground fight that continued on until victory.

This movie, which according to Pontecorvo did borrow from the experiences of an ex-parachutist he interviewed, was indefinitely postponed. France was still under constant alert with SOA-related terror activities and Pontecorvo's longtime producer Franco Castaldi was apprehensive at the thought of this film potentially, through showing the suffering of Algerians, making the film a target of terrorism.<sup>5</sup> The making of the film made headlines that caught the attention of Saadi Yacef. Yacef also had intentions of having a film adapted about the Battle of Algiers.

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<sup>5</sup> Bignardi, Irene. "The Making of The Battle of Algiers." *Cineaste*. 25.2 (2000): pp. 14-22. p. 14.

Saadi Yacef had been a major leader in the FLN and the leader of the group in the Casbah. He was captured and imprisoned, initially condemned to death, in France during part of the war for his role in organizing and executing terrorist acts during the French-Algerian War. While in prison he had written a memoir of his experience during the conflict. After the war ended, Yacef wanted his the memoir *Souvenirs de la Bataille d'Alger* adapted into a film. Yacef was responsible for Casbah Films, created, owned, and operated by the Algerian government. Yacef wanted to make his personal story into a film as well as help build up the Algerian film industry.

Casbah Films had government support and it was not hard to understand why there would be interest in this film. Learning about a nation's history would not necessarily come from books but rather, come through images. Algeria was a nation with a high illiteracy rate, not unlike Soviet Russia when directors like Sergei Eisenstein told stories and histories through film images that were pretty straight forward in the dialectic approach of class conflict in its images. It was about furthering revolutionary consciousness with images.

Yacef later admitted to knowing very little about cinema.<sup>6</sup> He tried to immerse himself by reading cinema magazines to learn about the great directors and watching the important works of the period such as Rossellini's *Rome: Open City*. He initially had his sights on three Italian filmmakers. One would be Solinas' other collaborator Francesco Rosi, who at the time would be in production for his bullfighting film, *The Moment of Truth*. Luchino Visconti, responsible for notable works such as the period pieces *The Leopard* and *Senso* and the more realistic contemporary film *Rocco and His Brothers*,

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<sup>6</sup> Crowds, Gary. "Terrorism and Torture in The Battle of Algiers: An Interview with Saadi Yacef." *Cineaste* Summer 29.3 (2004): pp. 30-37. p. 32. Print.

was also a director Yacef preferred, but there was never an agreement made between the two parties to see it through. Pontecorvo was Yacef's third choice and most importantly, was a director who was interested and available. Yacef and another FLN militant Salah Bazi began a trip overseas to meet Pontecorvo.

Yacef knew he had to look outside for the filmmakers for his story but hearing the news that Italians, Pontecorvo and Solinas, were interested in making a movie about Algeria, he put it upon himself that it had to be his story. He had lived it. Yacef believed that anybody at that point making a film about the French-Algerian conflict would be making a film purely from fiction.<sup>7</sup>

Yacef had known about Pontecorvo through *Kapo* but it was his political background as a militant communist in the Italian resistance that made him a compelling choice to direct the film. Yacef showed Pontecorvo his draft of his memoir. According to Yacef, Pontecorvo was not impressed calling it "naïve" and "not a cinematic treatment of the subject".<sup>8</sup> Pontecorvo introduced Yacef to his script for *Para*. The moment came for Pontecorvo to tell the Yacef and Yacef's feelers heard and read on *Para*, however, the idea of the film coming to fruition in Pontecorvo's original vision died. Yacef did not see any reason to help Pontecorvo on this project based on its story.

For Yacef, there was nothing believable about the story of *Para*. Yacef told Pontecorvo, "You're talking about Algeria? Why not just call it John Wayne? That is purely fiction."<sup>9</sup> Pontecorvo would become more familiar with Yacef's memoirs and he and Solinas would stay in Algeria for another two years to further investigate and

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<sup>7</sup> Crowdus, p. 32.

<sup>8</sup> Crowdus, p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> Dingeman, Jim. "'You Cannot Continually Inflict': An Interview with Saadi Yacef." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* Fall 49.2 (2008): pp. 46-64. p. 53. Print.

internalize the people, the event, the emotions and the politics behind the Battle of Algiers.

This would not just be a political film or a war film. For Pontecorvo it became almost about “the birth of a nation”.<sup>10</sup> But they did not want to celebrate the birth of Algeria in a propagandistic manner. Instead, according to Yacef, the final result of the film would be an agreement between the three men on what war does to both sides<sup>11</sup>:

“What we show is truly a revolution, a war, one that was made by people and everything that situation entailed. There was bravery, but there were also horror committed, there were serious errors... We committed a large number of errors. The enemy committed errors as well. Finally the conflict became like a chess game, with two players facing each other who reach a stalemate. Neither player won or lost- they didn’t win or lose, and we didn’t win or lose. It was history that won.”

Yacef as co-producer, however, would reject two previous drafts of the film finding the authenticity lacking.<sup>12</sup> For the final draft, Pontecorvo and Solinas used their personal interactions with real people involved in the conflict but there were the intellectual and philosophical ties that would hold the film together as being something more static recreation of an actual event. It would take an undeniable political stance beyond even the French-Algerian conflict on screen. The French were not villains in the classic sense. Instead, the systemic practice of colonialism was the villain. Solinas and Pontecorvo each detested colonialism but would present the French with evenhandedness because they believed depicting both sides in war showed equally awful acts and consequences. The crimes committed would be portrayed in a systemic sense and not individual as the reason for the battle and the war was colonialism.

Solinas and Pontecorvo would very much be influenced by the writings of the

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<sup>10</sup> Bignardi, p. 14.

<sup>11</sup> Crowds, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Crowds, p. 33.

controversial revolutionary philosophy of Frantz Fanon who wrote extensively on colonialism in Africa and specifically Algeria in works such as *Wretched of the Earth* and *A Dying Colonialism*. Fanon would write, “Colonialism must accept the fact that things happen without its control, without its direction.”<sup>13</sup> The pied-noir White Europeans of Algeria are entirely unaware and the tragic error of the French military believing that it killed off the influence of the FLN. Fanon would conclude *Algerian Unveiled* with, “The colonialists are incapable of grasping the motivations of the colonized. It is the necessities of combat that give rise in Algerian society to new attitudes, to new modes of action, to new ways.”<sup>14</sup> Pontecorvo and Solinas would capture the combat and transformation of Algerian society in their film by understanding the underlying system that caused this effect across an entire nation.

## **II. Funding and Production**

Getting *The Battle of Algiers* off the ground would was the most difficult for Pontecorvo. Yacef’s Casbah Films, publicly and privately funded, was made available on the Algerian side but only covered about half, though Yacef contends Casbah Films covered sixty-percent of the project, of what the estimated cost of the film would be. An underlying issue with the funding problems was interest by foreign investment.<sup>15</sup> The Italian producers that Pontecorvo confided with on previous works found this project uninteresting and not enticing as a film that consisted of Arabs, that Pontecorvo insisted on using non-professional actors in his cast, and that the film’s box office returns with such factors would not make the investment worthwhile. Pontecorvo would use the

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<sup>13</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "Algeria Unveiled." *The New Left Reader*. By Carl Oglesby. New York: Grove, 1969. 185. Print.

<sup>14</sup> Fanon, p. 185.

<sup>15</sup> Bignardi, pp. 15-16.

money he earned from *Kapo*'s success and signing a few promissory notes along the way to cover the rest of the film along with funding from his good friend and veteran Italian film producer, Antonio Musu.<sup>16</sup>

For casting, Pontecorvo had a particular image for certain characters but finding enough extras willing to do crowd scenes was a major priority. Overall, one hundred and thirty eight people were chosen to appear in the film. The actors who would play the journalists covering the war and the pied-noirs were in actuality European tourists. Pontecorvo would go to great lengths to get people who he was taken to visually, into the film because their image was a striking feature for Pontecorvo in making this film realistic. The man who is tortured in the beginning of the film was a petty criminal who committed attempted robbery and was arrested on the first day of shooting. Pontecorvo decided to keep the actor and worked on an agreement with the Vice Minister of Interior to have the man for the duration of the film and once filming was done the man would go off to prison.<sup>17</sup>

The one major role that would be played by a professional actor would be Jean Martin in the role of Col. Matthieu. Martin was an actor with a background in resistance fighting in the Second World War as well as being one of 121 signatories of a the *Manifesto of the 121*, that counted Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre among its other signatories, condemning the French action in Algeria and called for soldiers to be insubordinate. Martin's stance on Algeria made him a persona non grata, blackballed in the French theatre and cinema circles. The role of Col. Matheiu was partially based on Martin's background in the French resistance, with Matheiu's own experience as a

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<sup>16</sup> Crowds, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> Bignardi, pps. 16-17.

resistance fighter referenced in the film. Martin's tall built made for an imposing presence on the screen.

Other key roles still largely involved non-professionals. Brahim Haggiag would play Ali LaPointe. Haggiag was an illiterate farmer who had never seen a film before, but Pontecorvo coached him line by line in the film to make it work because he liked Haggiag's dramatic face.

The most notable casting choice Pontecorvo made was enlisting Saadi Yacef to portray a commander in an autonomous zone of Algiers. Essentially, Yacef would be playing a fragment of himself. Pontecorvo had grappled with the decision before telling Yacef his idea. Casting somebody so personally attached to the Battle of Algiers, especially somebody with the recognition of Yacef, proved to be an interesting clash of "The Dictatorship of Truth", where the real-life figure is suddenly in the film that is trying to get close to the truth. Yacef gained near mythical status in image among Algerians yet the role was not to play up, but arguably play down, the legend. Pontecorvo wanted Yacef to be disciplined in the role, reciting dialogue without any style or embellishments of what Pontecorvo considered the truth. Pontecorvo enlisted Yacef to portray a role in the film, highlighting Yacef's Hollywood looks he shared with actors such as a Paul Newman, a Tony Curtis, and a Paul Muni to act in the film while also being the most recognizable in the film.<sup>18</sup> Yacef's importance to the film's production, however, was on how smooth he made the production process based on of his power and prestige in the region gave Pontecorvo all the access and arrangements he wanted for the film.

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<sup>18</sup> Dingeman, p.53.

Pontecorvo demands from his cast included excessive takes over and over to purposely exhaust the actors, particularly in action sequences such as Yacef and Haggiag running through the Casbah streets in haiks. Pontecorvo wanted to make every action by the actors feel authentic, even their exhaustion. Often Pontecorvo would act out a certain scene and action for actors to 're-enact' it on screen, such as Haggiag's scene where he assaults a pied-noir while on the run. While not necessarily the most reality-based acting, Pontecorvo was also dealing with a large cast that many who, like Haggiag, were more inclined to visualize actions more than reading them and acting it out. In fact, Jean Martin remarked that during the scenes of the riots and revolts recreated for the screen there was a raw, energetic quality with much of the cast.<sup>19</sup> It had been only three years since independence, and through this film many were reliving these scenes rather than acting.

The crew that made up the film was small: nine Italians and a few Algerians who were merely technicians-in-training. The Algerian involvement was a part of an agreement between Pontecorvo and the Algerian government. These aspiring film technicians were on board to learn their craft and be a part of the birth of a viable Algerian film industry. The crew not only had the task of recreating the film's moment in an emotional sense but also from a physical sense. Pontecorvo and Yacef made an agreement that certain scenes had to take real locations for where these events occurred. Where Yacef's character, Djafar, got arrested and the building where Ali LaPointe hid before his demise, took place at locations that had been bombed.<sup>20</sup> Buildings got rebuilt

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<sup>19</sup> "Marxist Poetry: The Making of the Battle of Algiers". Prod. Peter Becker, Fumiko Takagi, and Jonathan Turell, 2004. *The Battle of Algiers*. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. Criterion Collection, 2004. DVD. Disc 2.

<sup>20</sup>Bignardi, p. 18.



and re-imploded to capture the terrorism and counter-terrorism by the French and the FLN. Set designer Sergio Canevari reconstructed buildings in the Casbah out of polystyrene so that when these structures exploded on camera they were easy to blow up and very minimal risk for the actors and extras getting injured in those scenes.<sup>21</sup>

The director of photography Marcello Gatti had to shoot with the constant notion that the film had to look like a newsreel. Pontecorvo's demands in the look of the film with the grainy cinematography shot with strong contrasts in the vein of a newsreel because of how people learned the news from newsreel footage. Pontecorvo wanted this film to appear to be a stolen historical record of events for the Battle of Algiers.

Pontecorvo fought back at any suggestions of color by the film's producers and encouraged Gatti, who had worked with him on *Kapo*, to shoot with a handheld camera. Pontecorvo spent pre-production experimenting with a 16mm camera around Algeria to figure out the balance of documentary and cinematic form. Gatti helped guide Pontecorvo's aspirations by shooting the film on a Dupont 4 camera that was known for its soft film but also that even with multiple dupe negatives would not produce hard images. The contrasts and grainy textures for this film became ever the more laborious effort due to the climate of Algeria which was non-stop bursts of sunlight. This led to a somewhat compromising situation in the filming of *The Battle of Algiers* with camera shootings of exterior scenes covered by screens to diffuse the intense light. Pontecorvo would frequently call to manipulate the shots of sunlight to hit the film to further heighten the sense of realism. The final result of the film was a copy of a negative that was re-photographed.

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<sup>21</sup> Bignardi, p. 18.

Pontecorvo would return to Italy needing to edit 91 meters of film that took months. Even in the editing process Pontecorvo aspired for a final result that contained rough edges to look more realistic, avoided looking ‘too Hollywood’. Pontecorvo would have a major disagreement with Mario Serandrei, an incredibly respected editor in Italian cinema, with Serandrei’s cut.<sup>22</sup> Eventually Pontecorvo and young editor Mario Morra worked on the cut with Morra coming on board based on his understanding of Pontecorvo’s demands for how the film should look.<sup>23</sup> Morra and Serandrei each got editing credits but it is largely Morra’s work on-screen.

*The Battle of Algiers* immediately hit the festival circuit in 1966, starting at the Venice Film Festival. Its subject matter would become subject to controversy, intrigue, and interest. It is important to examine the portrayal of the film’s subjects and how it works, or does not work, in the relationship of the style and realism of the film within “The Dictatorship of Truth” set by Pontecorvo. But the film did have a certain amount of post-production that added a more cinematic quality to the film such as its musical score.

### **III. The Use of Music**

Pontecorvo’s background included composing music in addition to his past work as a documentarian, journalist, tennis pro, and anti-fascist resistance fighter. Co-composing with Pontecorvo was the legendary film composer Ennio Morricone. Morricone, worldly renowned today as one of the great composers of film, widely known to mainstream audiences for his music in the Sergio Leone Spaghetti Westerns, worked with Pontecorvo during most of the post-production period after Pontecorvo returned to

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<sup>22</sup> Bignardi, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> “Marxist Poetry: The Making of *The Battle of Algiers*”, DVD.

Rome. This became the first film Morricone composed for Pontecorvo, the other being the follow-up to *The Battle of Algiers*, *Burn!*.

*The Battle of Algiers* helped bring out another artistic side of Pontecorvo to a global cinema audience. Pontecorvo's past as a composer and musician had been buried for years as he worked in filmmaking. He composed music for his documentaries but his work with Morricone became an exhausting battle of wills and ego.

While working on the film, Pontecorvo noticed an increasingly despondent silence among the crew. Pontecorvo felt at a loss and that he had lost the crew's confidence in such a labor-intensive film that was going over-schedule with a group of non-professional actors. Scenes were missing a necessary nuance that regardless of the number of script re-writes to make it feel real and convincing still needed something more. Pieces of music began to pop into Pontecorvo's head. It was what would help anchor the psychology and tension of scenes in the film.

Some scenes in the film had dialogue cut out completely in favor of the musical score, such as the crucial and memorable scene of the three women transforming themselves from their street dress into the European ideal of femininity. That scene's musical rhythm with percussion drums was akin to a heartbeat thumping, a perfect conveyance of the dramatic tension. Pontecorvo derived the music from a 'baba saleem', an Arab street beggar tune that used drums and castanets. The rhythmic musical heartbeats also represented more than the tension of the one scene but the collectivity of a heartbeat. As Irene Bignardi would write about the music of that scene, "It communicated the idea and the fervor of the solidarity within the struggle, while in the

background of the city, which they are about to go towards to accomplish their mission of guerrilla warfare, is glimpsed.”<sup>24</sup>

The first big test in the Pontecorvo-Morricone collaboration would be to find a musical theme for Ali LaPointe. Finding a convincing musical theme and agreeing to it would proved to be a taxing period as Pontecorvo already had many ideas in his head that he recorded and whistled but ultimately did not impress Morricone. These two figures, one extremely close to the material and the other, more distant and objective, almost could not find any common ground. Eventually they would find resolve, mainly because they were running out of time in post-production.

The intended emotional impact for the audiences seeing the aftermath of the bombing scenes is predicated on the musical choices Morricone and Pontecorvo made for those scenes. Music was derived from Bach and more baroque, religious music that Morricone put an original spin on that together with the scenes make a statement. The opening scene of the film that shows a man being tortured by the French para features music that in the first few notes takes from Bach’s religious “Passion According to St. Matthew” that is accompanied by a Gregorian-like chorus. It suggests a somber mood, the placement of a scene at the beginning of any film is unusual but the tone of the music leads the viewer to the conclusion that this act against this person is wrong without even knowing the context of the scene.

There are other implications of the music for that scene that also go hand in hand with the opinions that Pontecorvo and Solinas shared for the film, such as championing Frantz Fanon’s work as an important source. Fanon viewed torture, among other practices, as symptomatic of colonialism and that a violent reaction from those injured by

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<sup>24</sup> Bignardi, p. 18.

colonials would also be symptomatic of colonialism. Fanon writes in *Wretched of the Earth* that the damage of something as extreme and violent as torture is not just those who are injured but also damages those who inflict at a psychological level, especially in the case of torture. The implication of the first scene showing that this is a colonialist power torturing their oppressed native person, despite no context provided until a little later, foreshadows a vicious cycle of violence, vengeance, terrorism, and counter-terrorism that will follow. The somber mood is not only palpable with the victim of that scene but of the system of colonialism itself.

Pontecorvo made a film that showed the story of the people, mainly those who comprised the FLN, and the French police and military. Those in the gray, caught in the in-between were the Pied-Noirs. How were they to be portrayed? There were no individual characters in the ensemble aside from extras that did not share the screen time of the military, the police, or the collaborators, or even the journalists. There were no scenes of dialogue but background noise. How should they be viewed? They could not be at a distance the whole time as their role in the story is still crucial, as they are the ones who are bombed and harmed by the FLN. What should their deaths elicit in reactions by the viewer?

Pontecorvo could have easily cast the deaths pied-noirs in the bombings as vengeful justice for the Algerians and the FLN. He could have given them close-ups of these bourgeois, detached figures in a hideous manner. Yes, there is a scene where Ali LaPointe faces abuse at the hands of pied-noir teenagers but he punches a young man for tripping him. But there is something deeper in his reaction. Ali hates what the pied-noir stands for in tripping him. Why did the pied-noir trip him? There is without question a

variation of colonial supremacy the group of teenagers have over people like Ali. The pied-noirs are detached from the story until we reach the fever pitch of the film with the bombing mission. It is then we find that Pontecorvo and Morricone do not portray the pied-noirs as despicable but in fact, an equally tragic situation of colonialism. Their tragedy of the bombings and loss of life is no different from the tragedy of the bombings and loss of life inflicted on the Algerians.

Morricone and Pontecorvo constructed an equivalency in the scenes of both the Algerians and Pied-Noirs through music. The scenes of the aftermath of Algerians getting bombed shows a housing complex destroyed and the recovery of bodies is accompanied by a very deep, almost religious organ music that solemnly plays as these hopeless images are shown. The Milk Bar and cafe bombings shows an aftermath of dead young people who were seconds ago alive and vibrant. Those images are also accompanied by the same musical piece of organ music. Pontecorvo intentionally used the same music to show the same loss of life for both the Pied-Noirs and Algerians is a terrible tragedy.

When the film finally hit the festival circuit and into movie theaters around the world, it became a statement that gained notoriety and celebration. From the moment it was set to premiere at the Venice Film Festival, controversy of the film's presence at Venice immediately set the stage for what was to come in the following months.

#### **IV. The Premiere at Venice**

When *The Battle of Algiers* was set to premiere at the Venice Film Festival, a not yet finished edit of the film played for Luigi Chiarini, the director of the film festival. Chiarini left the film worried about its reception, as the festival would also have a large

French presence with films by Robert Bresson (*Au Hazard, Balthazar*), Francois Truffaut (*Fahrenheit 451*), and Alexander Kluge (*Yesterday Girl*) also in the competition for the top Gold Lion prize by the festival.<sup>25</sup> There were also thoughts on what to label the film, an Italian film or an Algerian one, as it was a financed co-production of Casbah Films and by Pontecorvo himself.

None of Chiaraini's fears of the film had to do with quality but in the sphere of the political. He would even suggest that this film would be better off in another major festival such as the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in the Czech Republic based on the predictable diplomatic problems raised by the French and others over the film's subject matter. The rest of the selection committee of the Venice Film Festival, however, felt the film was a work that had to be accepted based on its quality and that the diplomatic problems and tensions that would arise just had to be accepted as circumstance.

The first major screening of the film went to black to silence, making every member of the crew of the film present there nervous, until a nine-minute standing ovation followed. The FIPRESCI prize and Gold Lion, top honors, would also, unexpectedly, be rewarded to Pontecorvo. It was just the beginning of a series of awards and criticisms that gave the film its recognition.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

In filming *The Battle of Algiers*, Pontecorvo worked to make a film with balance and realism that also touched on the philosophical and political questions about the French-Algerian War. In making the film realistic through shooting on-location in the Casbah, using a large ensemble of non-professional actors, and demanding an aesthetic

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<sup>25</sup> Bignardi, p. 22.

that lent itself to realism, “The Dictatorship of Truth” was born. It was more than a recreation but a reliving of the moment. But the film is not entirely based on objectively witnessing the recreation of the Battle of Algiers.

In creating a musical score with Ennio Morricone, Pontecorvo had portrayed the sense of urgency, sadness, and dilemmas around anti-colonial insurgency and counter-insurgency. The music plays on the emotions of the audience to understand how colonialism has made the losses of both the pied-noirs and the Algerians equally terrible and depressing. Though it is attributed to the cycle of violence in colonialism as presented by Frantz Fanon, the audience can make that judgment with its own ears and mind when watching the film and that is the real triumph of the film coming together in the post-production in combining the cinematic diegesis with its realistic imagery.

The film reviews hit around the world on the film and the demand to see it grew and grew as well as the praise and uneasiness toward the film. The themes of the film would come into focus from the critical world and political world.



## Chapter 3 The Themes and Depictions Within *The Battle of Algiers*

### I. The Portrayal of the Arab

*The Battle of Algiers* marked a groundbreaking moment in the portrayal of Arabs in global cinema. For years this was a group that was the other, exotic, a bit funny, a bit strange, but also insignificant even when many films took place in Arab settings. Arabs were considered just too different for films to market to an audience. The settings of these dramas and stories in Arab countries were very much in the control of those who controlled the country, the colonial settlers. *The Battle of Algiers*, when initially just Saadi Yacef's story, was intended be the antidote to decades of the cultural imperialism and demonizing the people of the region through film.

Saadi Yacef in pushing for a viable film industry in Algeria's post-independence period was very much a response to the previous decades French cinema in North Africa prior that pushed a cultural imperialism on Algeria and other regions. During the previous period, colonial authorities served as film supervisors when films came to shoot in locations.<sup>1</sup> Roles never got offered to Arabs, even in films that took place in the Casbah.<sup>2</sup> David Henry Slavin, an expert of French colonial cinema, writes, "Depictions of native life, accurate or not, were incidental to stories that reflected the worldview and mind-set of Europeans."<sup>3</sup> Most of the films that were screened to Algerians, however, came from the United States. It was largely argued there was nothing to see in Algeria

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<sup>1</sup> Porter, Laurence, "Postcolonial Images: Studies in North African Film, and: African Filmmaking: North and South of the Sahara" *SubStance* 2<sup>nd</sup> ser. 36.113. (2007), pp. 147-160. p. 147

<sup>2</sup> Porter, p. 147

<sup>3</sup> Slavin, David Henry. *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths*, Johns Hopkins UP, 2001, p. 16

that could be labeled cinematic and if for any reason Algeria had to be the film locale in any instance, the locals got pushed aside. Yet France and world cinema in general took parts of Arab culture either demonizing it and amplify the exoticness of it as something to fear or Westernizing it to make it appealing.

Arabs in cinema largely remained invisible or hidden in plain sight in veiled haiks and sheiks, often in dark colors adding to the mystery and otherness. Even classic Arabic stories often got white-washed, like in the 1947 film *Sinbad the Sailor* having a major star like Douglas Fairbanks Jr., a Caucasian actor, star as the Arab legend to appeal to mainstream audiences. The lightness of skin tone of an actor such as Fairbanks as the hero was contrasted to the darker skin tones of the villainous roles that perpetuated the myth of Arabs as a dangerous other that posed as a threat to the lighter-skinned heroic characters or threatened to corrupt the light-skinned female ingénue sexually but the Arabs are too ominous, too sleazy to win over the ingénue.<sup>4</sup> There are even instances in recent film history that feature the light-skinned Arab hero exists against the exotic, dark-skinned villains such as the Disney animated film, *Aladdin* (1992).

Female Arabs tended to be exotic, showing lots of skin to appeal to the Western male for intrigue or are placed in the background or shadows unseen in their dark veils that are submissive. Rarely in either instance did the Arab women have a voice but when they showed agency they often portrayed the role of a terrorist, the villain. There is nothing about the intelligence of Arab women that are portrayed in a positive manner. They are weak enough to objectify or ignore or they are just another problematic threat for the West.

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<sup>4</sup> *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Starring: Jack Sheehan. Dir. Jeremy Earp and Sut Jhally. 2006. DVD.

Even in the instance these Arab characters served not as a threat or a villain to fear, they served as the incompetent, buffoonish other often used strictly for comedic purposes. These are often one-dimensional caricatures that would mostly be found in animated cartoons but are also found in plenty of live-action films that are equally dehumanizing. These images are extended from the very first contact between Arabs and Europeans to the colonial period through art and literature and have lived on generations later through these film images that are often created by people with little cultural understanding of Arabs.

The portrayal of Arabs could also be shown in the roles of both the villain and the incompetent buffoon. A major characteristic that combined both the villain and buffoon aspect was portraying Arabs as being behind the times in terms of weaponry. Take the scene in the Steve Spielberg film *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) where an Arab character, dressed entirely in black, shows off his sword skills only to be shot with a gun by the American Professor Henry “Indiana” Jones. The deadpan, darkly comedic nature of the scene, Harrison Ford as Jones is exasperated by the swordplay and after he fires the shot the Arab drops dead as his fellow Arabs in the crowded market celebrate the death, plays on how primitive Arabs cannot match the modern, Western innovations such as guns.

*The Battle of Algiers* makes this notion of Arabs being behind in firepower absurd given how this is a film on the FLN campaign against the French that prominently featured the planting and detonating of bombs perpetrated by FLN terrorists. What made the film shocking is that there are several stereotypes about Arabs being shattered throughout the movie but none more so than in those bombing sequences. These people are not buffoons or people to laugh at, but to make people realize their struggles. These

people are not villains, but people who are fighting colonial oppression and are making these tough choices out of the methods to end that oppression.

Movies that came after *The Battle of Algiers* began to play with the portrayal of the terrorist, but again, in a way that was a threat to the Western ideals, specifically the heroic Western protagonists and the way of life to the world at large. The attitudes of Arabs in cinema did not evolve so much as the form of which the Arabs in cinema became evolved into a more modern characterization that still had them as a villain or the other. The modern portrayal of the terrorist often contains very little nuance or reasoning behind the acts perpetrated by such characters, usually to avoid ever making the terrorist appear sympathetic in any way that such instances will also implicate the West and the Western audience. In many ways the Arab today has assumed the role of the German, the Native American, and the Soviet as the villain in cinema about conflict.

*The Battle of Algiers* is an exception in many ways to both the past and the present portrayal of Arabs. Pontecorvo chose real people by their faces not to fit a certain character archetype but supporting his thesis of "The Dictatorship of Truth". We may see many of these characters in traditional clothing as well as contemporary clothing of the period but they are above all real people with real faces that are expressive and genuine. Their body parts are exposed to give prayers, such as the solemn yet striking scene of the mass of people in the Casbah watching the demise of Ali LaPointe. We see and hear their emotions. They are out in the open rather than merely in the shadows or background. We hear their voices and sounds, such as the ululations of the women dancing in the streets at the end of the film. Women are portrayed as aware of their status as ignored and use it as an asset to help assist in the bombings whether dolled up in

Western clothing or in their haiks. Many extras and characters in the film are re-experiencing the not too distant past of the war and colonial tensions only adds to the raw appeal of the film that so many other films failed to explore.

Yacef's Casbah Films is still a successful movie production company in promoting Algeria as a film locale. The more notable works after *The Battle of Algiers* was an adaptation in getting Albert Camus' *The Stranger*, directed by Luchino Visconti and starring Marcello Mastroianni. Other notable works under Casbah Films ranged Spaghetti Westerns to documentaries.<sup>5</sup>

*The Battle of Algiers* shows a people who are neither heroic nor villainous or as the other. They are portrayed as human who while are imperfect take action through reason to rescue their humanity from colonialism. We see the real faces and bodies of Arab people and are in many instances seeing them relive their moments of revolution on the screen. In portraying the Arab, Pontecorvo showed the many facets of being an Arab with some religiosity, a values system, and gender divisions in Algeria at the time of revolting against colonialism. Colonialism is not just shown destroyed in this movie; the Western cultural imperialism on the region and on the portrayal of Arabs is forever fractured for people after seeing this film. The realism of the film marks an instance where the Arabs are front and center with the white, European imperialists in the background, out of focus rather than at the forefront. *The Battle of Algiers* remains a shining exception of the portrayal of Arabs with understanding of their situation and culture that is understated and powerful at the same time.

## **II. Portrayal of the Colonial Situation in Algeria**

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<sup>5</sup> Crowds, Gary. "Terrorism and Torture in The Battle of Algiers: An Interview with Saadi Yacef." *Cineaste* Summer 29.3 (2004): pp. 30-37. p. 37. Print.

From a historical standpoint, *The Battle of Algiers* is a very simplified representation of events and requires a lot of historical context. In the 1960s, the fall of France as a major colonial empire was a major topic of discussion and debate that when *The Battle of Algiers* was released, much of the audience knew enough about the recent events to know the context of why Algeria was fighting the French and the relationship the Algerians had between the French and pied-noirs. Today, the context is lost on many viewers.

France had made Algeria a part of its empire in 1830, formally under the loose rule of the Turkish Empire.<sup>6</sup> Before the Turks Algeria had been ruled by the Carthagians, the Romans, the Arabs, and the Spaniards.<sup>7</sup> So there was this lack national identity and political instability among the successive conquerors of the region, yet the Algerians were considered to be a very literate, well-read population that had a structure that afforded villages schools. That all changed when the French came. Specifically speaking it changed in a very bad way for Algeria when Charles X was succeeded in 1848 by Napoleon's Second Republic that sought to make Algeria a center for commercial trade. It was met with Algerian resistance led by Abd-el-Kader, who ultimately surrendered to the French military after their brutal reprisals proved too much. Algeria was not just a colony of the French empire. Algeria was declared an integral part of France in 1847 becoming a nation split into three territories or departments, Algiers, Oran, and Constantine.

France had since Napoleon's Second Republic made any elements or undercurrents of Arab nationalism stagnate due in part by making Algeria more than just

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<sup>6</sup> Horne, Alistair. *A Savage War of Peace: Algeria, 1954-1962*. New York: New York Review, 2006. p. 28. Print.

<sup>7</sup> Horne, p. 29.

a colonial territory. France had made Algeria integral to their empire yet their treatment of Algerians showed superiority. The pied-noirs, many refugees of the imperial colony Alsace-Lorraine, came to the country and received full French citizenship.<sup>8</sup> The Algerians had a choice of gaining French citizenship to follow French law but that meant renouncing their rights in Islamic law and for many their Islamic faith. Few followed the path of assimilation and chose to remain under their Islamic law.

Because of how effective the French were at undercutting Arab nationalism by making Algeria an integral part of France, it is hard to pinpoint the exact moment where the nationalist and resistance movements began. Many cite the Setif Massacre, the violent outburst on V-E Day, May 8<sup>th</sup> 1945, of a pro-independence demonstration which last five days in bloodshed between the demonstrators and French. The Setif Massacre became a defining moment that ultimately functioned as symbol with the slogans and the white and green flags of Algerian independence becoming the symbols of the war. But the day was still a dark one in Algerian history. 6,000 Algerians is the most recent estimate of those killed in the massacre.<sup>9</sup> Villages or mechtas got slaughtered and bombed. Any pied-noir or French colonial presence in the region got hunted down in retaliation. Setif may have been a catalyst for many Algerian in resistance but before Setif there existed movements and groups that were fighting against the prevailing imperialistic French culture, French language, and French education system.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of movements that included the religious, Pan-Arabism movement led by Ben Badis, the liberals led by Ferhat Abbas, and the

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<sup>8</sup> "Remembering History". *The Battle of Algiers*. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. Criterion Collection, 2004. DVD. Disc 3.

<sup>9</sup> Horne, p. 27.

revolutionaries led by Messali Hadj. The ultimate issues within these three movements came between the different philosophies of Hadj and Abbas. Badis and Hadj continually moved toward the belief that Algeria could no longer be apart of France and that to revolt would be reclamation of Algerian identity through preserving Islamic culture, Abbas believed in assimilation as a path to equality, not separatism to form an Algerian nation that he did not believe existed. Badis died in 1940. Hadj founded the Algerian People's Party (PPA) that grew militant and out of Hadj's control, no thanks to his exile in France, with many ex-PPA members creating what would be the Front de Liberation Nationale (FLN). Hadj later became leader of the MNA (Mouvement National Algerien) that ultimately was a more assimilation party. Ultimately, Hadj died in exile in Paris. Abbas joined the FLN after becoming disillusioned with France, later becoming the President of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic from 1958-1961.

The Algerians who were pro-assimilation did more than stand by a philosophy. Many in fact fought for the French empire during World War II. The resistance groups such as the FLN tried to re-enlist them to their causes throughout the war period citing that them joining their 'brothers' and not repent their origins. Many, however, would collaborate with the French. These people were referred to as harkis, a word that would later evolve into a term of derision, a slur used against many African immigrants to France. To be a harki was to be a traitor who warranted being treated like a second-class citizen. For many of the 40,000 harkis who immigrated after the war they were treated exactly as such in France and there were an estimated 150,000 pro-French Algerians



slaughtered in Algeria after the Evian Accords.<sup>10</sup> The term harki is still a major word of derision, especially among the African immigrant community in France.

Algeria's colonial situation was vastly different from the other colonial situations mainly due to the pied-noirs, the White European, not even from France, who came to Algeria as artisans, builders, and traders who ultimately settled living in Algeria with their succeeding generations also living in Algeria, many after the Second Republic reclaimed Algeria. The Algerians shared no connection to either the French, there was an inferiority complex, or the native Algerians, the pied-noirs were overall indifferent to their plight. Yet the pied-noirs had a powerful lobby that helped derail any French laws that were based on giving the native Algerians any equal footing with them.

*The Battle of Algiers* shows colonialism as a segregated society. There are very few scenes of Arabs and pied-noirs together. The few scenes of interactions in the film of these two groups come together in the film show conflict and hostility. There is a clash like in Ali LaPointe assaulting a pied noir who tripped him up on the streets. Ali LaPointe as a film character is written and portrayed as the perfect victim of colonialism, very much a symbol as much as a person. Ali's journey through the film shows a growing political awareness of his surroundings gradually realizing that the France is oppressing him and his fellow countryman.

Ali is a street pimp and illiterate. For Ali, he begins to feel this sense of inferiority after being tripped and laughed at by strangers. And for what reason aside that he is a dark-skinned Algerian? He knows this is unfair and acts on impulse, by punching one of the strangers but getting arrested in the process. Ali is taken into prison where he

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<sup>10</sup> Jeffries, Stuart. "France Forced to Confront Betrayal." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 18 Aug. 2001. Web. 01 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/aug/19/warcrimes>>.

witnesses the execution of militant supporter of independence shouting revolutionary slogans and praising Allah. The audience hears from the distance and out of frame the shouts and the same slogans in the cells of the prison. Suddenly the people in Ali's cell, to that point just playing cards, are also chanting these same revolutionary slogans. From Ali's point of view we see the prisoner and the weapon for the execution, a guillotine. Pontecorvo does not show the execution but a series of cuts to the windows of the prison, presuming that every prisoner is watching. When we hear the sound of the guillotine blade it cuts to Ali's eyes. From then on he has been transformed into a politically aware individual who now gets involved in the FLN rising up the ranks that takes us back to beginning in explaining why the French seek to kill him.

Pontecorvo portrays the Algerian people as a people united against colonialism. The scene of the general strike pushed by the FLN is shown of the people overwhelmingly siding with the FLN cheering revolutionary slogans with the women ululating in solidarity. No division among the FLN is portrayed. There is no character shown who would rather live under colonialism, there is no alternative group to the FLN seen in the film. You could only vaguely point to a possible alternative would be where Ali was early on in the film, unaware of his oppression and hard life being attributed to colonialism. With that in mind there is the notable scene later in the film, during the 6<sup>th</sup> day of the FLN strike, where the young Petit Omar makes broadcast on the streets of Algeria, stealing a French radio around a check point to do so, telling the inhabitants of the Casbah to rise up. This comes after the French used that speaker system to propagandize and depict the FLN as wanting to starve and condemn the people of the Casbah into poverty that seems to fall on deaf ears.

The response to Omar's plea is this growing awareness and agreement. Just the voice of a young child speaker stops people in their tracks. Ali's political awareness and conversion to the revolutionary cause, going to prison and witnessing a man's execution by guillotine, is extreme while with this scene the audience essentially sees the awareness and conversion happen on the screen through encouragement by the innocence but idealistic words of a child.

That these values are shown in the personification of characters like Omar is significant. Only a few major figures of the FLN are shown, Saadi Yacef as Djafar, though essentially playing himself, Ben M'Hidi, and guerrilla leader Ali LaPointe. Though these men are shown in their roles with the FLN, it becomes more about the Algerian people exhibiting and absorbing the revolutionary qualities they espoused than concentrating on their words and actions. These people unite in becoming aware of their inequality.

What is not seen is that the divisions among Algerians that were in no way as unified as portrayed on-screen. In fact, the divisions among Algerians in approaching colonialism was complicated and violent, leading to some members of the FLN, even Saadi Yacef, having blood on their hands.

The relationship between the FLN and the more moderate but still nationalist-based MNA, was a very divided and bitter toward the other's goals. There existed other groups who believed in assimilation to the current nation of Algeria rather than an independent nation. Equality on the level of the pied-noirs as French citizens was a goal. The biggest group of the pro-assimilation Algerians was the MNA, founded by Messali Hadj, as a counter to the FLN. The war would not just be a fight for the resistance of

colonialism but an internal battle over Algeria's future. The two groups knew this. Inter-organizational violence was common to the point that the MNA and FLN mainly attacked each other rather than their French occupiers.<sup>11</sup> FLN leader Ramdane Abane spoke of the military arm of the FLN, the Armee de Liberation Nationale (ALN) in its capabilities of not just fighting the French but groups such as the Algerian Communist Party (PCA) and the MNA saying, "The tribunal of the ALN will be pitiless towards traitors and enemies of the country..."<sup>12</sup> The FLN/ALN considered the PCA and MNA on par with the French and pied-noir settlers.

The issues with the PCA and MNA extended long before the war began. The PCA's role in the Setif Massacre made their function in Algerian society very controversial, especially to the cause of resistance. The Secretary General of the PCA Amar Ouzegane wrote of the events of Setif with the most contempt of the demonstrations writing in the PCA journal, *Liberte*, "The organizers of these troubles must be swiftly and pitilessly punished, the instigators of the revolt must be put in front of a firing squad."<sup>13</sup> Their public condemning in the episode at Setif also had allegations they were actively involved in the reprisals of demonstrators. The PCA membership included many European pied-noirs, including Albert Camus, also aligning with Moscow and the French Communist Party.<sup>14</sup> But steadily the group became more attuned to the revolutionary times with various attempts to work with the FLN ultimately rebuffed. The PCA would dissolve in 1955 with some leaders heading into exile and other remaining

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<sup>11</sup> Abrahms, Max. "What Terrorists Really Want Terrorist Motives and Counterterrorism Strategy." *International Security* Spring 32.4 (2008): pp. 78-105. p. 91. Print.

<sup>12</sup> Horne, p. 133.

<sup>13</sup> Horne, p. 27.

<sup>14</sup> Horne. p. 136.

members joining the FLN under suspicion through most of the war. The PCA is important to note because of their relationship to Moscow caused the FLN and later the Algerian government to never really have a warm relationship with the Soviet Union, meaning there was very little foreign assistance between the Soviet Union and Algeria despite sharing similar ideological values.

Messali Hadj grew more moderate and opposed the war with France criticizing the violent methods of each side. The MNA was losing popular support in Algeria due to its pro-reconciliation rhetoric, no thanks in large part for Hadj being under house arrest in Paris during the conflict, where the MNA enjoyed much stronger support among the immigrant population. The Gaullists in France and Algeria much preferred the MNA as an alternative but it was evaporating with major losses against the FLN-ALN. The events such as the Paris Massacre of 1961, where the French police perpetrated violence against armless Algerian Muslims with clubs killing approximately 200 hundred lives, also played a role in dividing the immigrant community in Paris.<sup>15</sup>

The FLN eventually took hold of the Algerian public ultimately becoming a one-party government of an independent Algeria but during the lead up to and during the war period there existed other groups in Algeria who were more open to dialogue with the French. These groups never once represented in the film. The FLN was the more left-wing group who promoted populism and above all, national liberation against the French. But to not alienate the more conservative groups, such as the Ben Badis' religious movement that sought to reinvigorate the Islamic faith into everyday Algerian life, the FLN worked to appeal to these groups in a way where they would not quite be devout in

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<sup>15</sup> Derderian, Richard L. "Algeria as a Lieu De Mémoire: Ethnic Minority Memory and National Identity in Contemporary France." *Radical History Review* Spring 83 (2002): pp. 28-43. p. 37. Print.

Marxist-Leninism or Islam but adapting an ideology, Arab socialism, where both creeds existed but zealous commitment to neither.

### **III. The Portrayal of Islam, Women and Gender**

The FLN had an undeniable appeal to a segment of the Muslim majority but it is the role of Muslim values system that is embraced rather than the religiosity of being Muslim. The Muslim identity under the French had been deemed separate from the French identity in Algeria. To become a French citizen was to renounce the Islamic laws and therefore the Islamic faith to follow French law. Only a few thousand had ever gone through the process to gain their French citizenship. Forging together nationalism with the Islamic faith was not a stretch in reaction for Algerians responding to colonial repression that made being Muslim the 'other' in society.

To be a Muslim in Algeria was to live under no rule of law that France and the pied-noir, and to get be able to live under that rule of law involved renouncing Muslim faith. The inequality from a social, political, and economic point of view for Algerians in of itself was glaring but how religion was used against Algerians served as another example of colonial supremacy.

The birth of the FLN saw allegiance to the Muslim population. FLN coalesced the Muslim values system into their identity with a moral authority and civil authority depicted in the wedding scene to *The Battle of Algiers*. The couple married has their ceremony officiated FLN official, not an Iman, who is not holding a copy of the Quran but a FLN registry.<sup>16</sup> A moral authority in dispelling personal habits and vices that violated the Quran followed that civil authority. Banning drug abuse, prostitution, and

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<sup>16</sup> Evangelista, Matthew. "Algeria: A World Constructed out of Ruins." *Gender, Nationalism, and War: Conflict on the Movie Screen*. Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2011. pp. 39-40. Print.

alcoholism in the Casbah. Pontecorvo portrayed this moral authority in a particularly startling, if disturbing scene of a group of children chasing an old drunkard through the Casbah. The man is publically shamed and harassed by this younger, energetic group of youth who verbally call attention to their actions with their loud voices. The scene is early in the film and foreshadows both the future instances of how Algerians asserted themselves in both voice and groups but also represented the younger generation pushing for change. The age difference between the drunkard and the children is starkly explicit and the youth not showing their anger at a police authority but at the older generation to better themselves is certainly not an unintentional choice by Pontecorvo.

There existed some religious aspects in the symbolism of what the French represented. For many it was not about achieving independence, the struggle to chase away 'the devil' out of Algeria.<sup>17</sup>

The film shows images of mass Muslim prayer in the moments before Ali LaPointe's demise and in the aftermath of the first bombing but very little religiosity is taken or shown. The FLN espoused the Muslim value system to a majority Muslim population but it was the anti-colonial politics and tactics that would have the FLN make its mark in the war. But the film and the war itself exhibited little of Islamic fundamentalism. Faith was important but just a part of the drive in the struggle.

Nationalist movements that become militarized through the gendered works of power amplify the relationship of masculinity and violence when it takes its political form.<sup>18</sup> It is the identity these communities take on in these movements that often show

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<sup>17</sup> Margerrison, Christine. "History, Ideology, and Camus's 'Le Renégat'" *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* October 64.4 (2010): pp. 423-437. p. 430. Print.

<sup>18</sup> Evangelista, p. 26.

the men taking up the arms while the women are the support systems. This was not the case in Algeria or the FLN.

The uniqueness of the French-Algerian War included the role of women had on the Algerian side, specifically the most radical elements of the revolution like the FLN. Women would take the role of helpers and assist their male counterparts.

All but fifteen minutes of the nearly two-hour runtime of *The Battle of Algiers* focuses on female characters.<sup>19</sup> These female characters say very little but their roles display both their assistance and indispensability to the FLN cause.

Women proved to be indispensable in the Algerian conflict in carrying over weapons through check points but the weaponry evolved from the handguns to the smuggling of bombs. It is the smuggling of the bombs that prove to be the most shocking and striking scenes of *The Battle of Algiers*. How it is depicted is still hotly debated but the portrayal of how the female characters were successful is a fascinating insight that makes the sequence so compelling.

The film initially was titled *Thou Shalt Deliver in Pain* but that seemed to play up and trivialize the struggle in gendered terms.<sup>20</sup> While the film was being made Pontecorvo noticed the decline in the role of women in public life. It was as though their worlds still remained in colonial times. Pontecorvo intentionally had the film end with the shots of women ululating on the streets and a woman waving the Algerian flag to serve as a symbol and inspiration.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Evangelista, p. 27.

<sup>20</sup> Reid, Donald. "Re-viewing The Battle of Algiers with Germaine Tillion." *History Workshop Journal* Autumn 60 (2005): pp. 93-115. p. 107. Print.

<sup>21</sup> Reid, 107.



We see three women who are in a changing room looking at the mirrors and each other as they let their hair down. One woman cuts off nearly half of her hair length while another carefully puts on makeup. The woman who cut her hair later dyed her hair to a lighter color. Through this montage they are all changing out of their more conservative clothes and into more Western clothing.

The choices made in the montage are especially telling and show a lot of tension. The score by Pontecorvo and Ennio Morricone continually builds through the whole sequence. There is no dialogue as these women transform into a very European and Western ideal of beauty and femininity. Initially, Solinas had the women interacting and joking in his script which Pontecorvo decided any interactions and anything perceived as an everyday normal activity in that scene would come off abnormal given what task each of them were about to do in a short period of time.<sup>22</sup> These women are not only silent but share a stone-faced disposition.

After the montage they are waiting for their instructions given by the Saadi Yacef character. These women and the Yacef character are based off of 'Saadi's girls', a small group of women, that included future Algerian government official Zohra Drif, assisted him in the successful bombing campaigns. He looks at all three of them, accepting the two of them but hesitant of the other woman who did little to 'Westernize' her looks compared to the other women. She assures Yacef's character that she can get through the checkpoints to accomplish the planting of the bombs by bringing her child with her so there will be no suspicions.

The women are given three bags for three locations of bombings: an airport, a café, and a milk bar. Going through the checkpoints the most Western-looking women

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<sup>22</sup> Bignardi, p. 18.

not only get through the checkpoint but they are singled out as being most acceptable by the French authorities to pass the checkpoints.

There would, of course, be major consequences if these women were to get caught. The film does not delve into those potential consequences but the reality for women caught involved French para performing sexualized violence on them such as rape, in addition to torture. One particular victim, Djamila Boupacha, after being arrested for an attempted bombing of a café was repeatedly beaten and raped with a bottle to confuse to a crime she did not commit. Boupacha's story and preceding legal case would make international headlines and outcry after being written by Simone de Beauvoir in the French publication *Le Monde* on June 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1960. The French government seized the article from being published.<sup>23</sup> The article became a jump-off point for collective resistance against the French government's rallying around the case of Boupacha not just among the French intellectuals like Beauvoir but also French public opinion. Boupacha was released by the French in 1962 but forcibly ordered back to Algeria by the FLN.

The role of Algerian women and gender also had an effect on their male counterparts beyond assisting them with bombs but the men, though always in the power position of making decisions, found themselves in a very vulnerable position of fighting oppression. Through the rising campaigns of political violence, all Algerian men were looked at with suspicion. This sense of male characters feeling vulnerable and the means to which they would execute their missions are shown in *The Battle of Algiers*. Scenes of male vulnerability depicted by Pontecorvo is played off slightly for comedic effect yet

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<sup>23</sup> Kruks, Sonia. "Simone De Beauvoir and the Politics of Privilege." *Hypatia* Winter 20.1 (2005). pp. 178-205, p. 192. Print.

the images and scenes were based off of real acts of desperation by the FLN, specifically from Yacef's experiences.

The way women would transform into the Western ideal of the female the men would choose to transform into the hidden, least apparent person of Algerian society, the women in veils. Fanon wrote about, "... the veil has been manipulated, transformed into a technique of camouflage, a means of struggle."<sup>24</sup> Women would carry bombs, grenades, and machine guns under their veils. Men would cross-dress under haiks, cloaks, and veils hiding firearms. This scene is portrayed in *The Battle of Algiers* as not a particularly successful method in terms of execution. The characters of Yacef's Djafar and Ali LaPointe wearing the haiks but are immediately detected and flee while spraying bullets at the authorities that chase them through the Casbah. The scene looks pathetic and the men look ridiculous in their clothing. The reason LaPointe and Yacef survive and do not get caught, imprisoned or killed is due to the goodwill of women. They owe their lives to these women who let them hide in a dry well as authorities lose them.

The women's struggle in decolonization was a topic of discussion for Frantz Fanon. Women played an important role in this campaign and it is one of the events Fanon had in mind in presenting his model of women's emancipation coming through participation in the revolution, rather than as something conferred by the French.<sup>25</sup> Yet Fanon's presentation of unveiling as an act that transforms the identity of the woman bound by tradition into a revolutionary is not presented that way in the film. There are some women in the resistance wear veils, like the one who tests Ali la Pointe by giving

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<sup>24</sup> Fanon, Frantz. "Algeria Unveiled." *The New Left Reader*. By Carl Oglesby. New York: Grove, 1969. p. 183. Print

<sup>25</sup> Reid, Donald. "The Worlds of Frantz Fanon's 'L'Algérie Se Dévoile'" *French Studies: A Quarterly Review* October 61.4 (2007): pp. 460-75. p. 462. Print.

him an unloaded gun to use in an assault and then takes him to the cell leader after he passes the test. The unveiled seen in the film are the women who set bombs in the city and the young bride at a marriage performed by FLN authorities.

*The Battle of Algiers* depicts how and why women were chosen as helpers and worked in their roles. But there is never this depiction of these women that is ever truly independent of men assisting them or men getting their assistance. Even their major role in the film, the buildup to the bombings, includes Yacef's character and the bomb maker who is just as indispensable. But the current reality in independent Algeria showed a more discouraging situation of women having to take a backseat to men. Pontecorvo made a conscious decision to symbolically show women protesting and making ululations on the streets of the Casbah in the final moments of the film against the French Army as the film's narrator marks the official date of independence, July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1962. All of the shots and close ups were of women, even though we see men present on the streets. Pontecorvo realized how the current situation was corresponding to the film for women, so he made something inspiring about the women of the movement that remains striking as it is now about the gendered roles of violence but the will of the people that transcend gender in the struggle.

#### **IV. The Portrayal of Terrorism**

Pontecorvo's own experience in fighting in the Italian resistance during World War II undoubtedly played a role in shaping the film's revolutionary spirit. For Pontecorvo, "Resistance is the same in Algiers as it is in Paris, Turin or Milan."<sup>26</sup> Pontecorvo was much aware of the fact that many in the French resistance were now

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<sup>26</sup> "Pontecorvo: *The Dictatorship of Truth*". Dir. Oliver Curtis. Radiotelevisione Italiana, 1992. *The Battle of Algiers*. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. Criterion Collection, 2004. DVD. Disc 2.

fighting in Algeria and Indochina or making the decisions in such matters. Pontecorvo believed in the universality of resistance being no different in the Third World from the Western World. But he also saw a disconnect in the understanding of Third World resistance by the Western World that heavily implicated those very world powers.

Pontecorvo and Solinas made sure *The Battle of Algiers* stated outright how it felt about terrorism. Real-life people such as Ben M'Hidi were used to state how much terrorism would play a role in the fight. He speaks to Ali LaPointe, on a rooftop in a scenic view of the Casbah for a backdrop, who himself is running on impulses to kill his oppressors. M'Hidi, however, is more practical, stating:

“[...] Wars cannot be won with terror attacks. Neither wars, nor revolutions. Terrorism is useful for starting a process, but afterwards the whole population has to act.”

Terrorism can only do so much for the cause of the Algerians, based on what the film explains. Their struggle and gaining public support with these acts are key and perhaps necessary. Terrorism portrayed in *The Battle of Algiers* would gain the film notoriety but not for sheer shock and gratuity but for many, the conviction for the necessity of terrorism.

Frantz Fanon believed that through decades of oppression something unnatural as violence would become a natural reaction by those who were the oppressed writing in *Wretched of the Earth*, “It is the intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force.”<sup>27</sup> The film, accurately, shows that the first indiscriminant bombings are first done by pied-noirs with connections to French authority and law enforcement, though the real truth behind who was directly involved remains a mystery but it is largely concluded those who did it had connections to French

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<sup>27</sup> Fanon, Frantz, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 1963. p. 73.

law enforcement.<sup>28</sup> It is indiscriminant, a shabby housing complex in the Casbah that explodes killing its inhabitants, including children, who are innocent victims. This is where the campaign of violence is shown to begin but in a more understated way, showing the guillotine of Algerian revolutionaries in the beginning also presents what started the cycle of violence. The FLN argued these men as portrayed in the film were prisoners of war and their execution was a war crime.<sup>29</sup> Though the film show more as Ali LaPointe's ideological conversion it also serves, though context is needed, in presenting the gray area of terrorism versus state. In the case of terrorism in *The Battle of Algiers* is shown born out of the will to fight back.

*The Battle of Algiers* really shows no other option but violence in fighting back. There are no real discussions of alternative options. Those options are not present in the film story or plot wise but in the revolutionary spirit of the film's ideology.

The film's most memorable line delivered by Ben M'Hidi answering a question at a press conference while in custody remarking on the methods of the terrorism delivered by the FLN saying "Give us your bombers, and you can have your baskets!" Out of context this quote is unusual but in the scene it shows a hostile exchange between M'Hidi and the reporter who asked the question, holding little regard for M'Hidi's justification for terrorism. There is also the presence of Col. Mathieu essentially moderating the press conference yet also serving as a symbolic presence as a figure of authority and French supremacy in that scene. Leslie Hill argues this scene is the perfect example of dialectic; the opposites have united. Hill goes on to argue that through this dialectic of 'clash'

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<sup>28</sup> "Remembering History", DVD.

<sup>29</sup> "Remembering History", DVD.

there is a certain amount of reciprocity.<sup>30</sup> The questions among the assembled media seem too detached and hysterical to be on Mathieu's side. There exists an understated mutual respect for one another of what M'Hidi and Mathieu are doing in leading for their side. Mathieu and his men never look exasperated in what they see the FLN doing, they are competent but not cold-hearted military man who search for the tactical response rather than agonize over what the FLN have done.

The bombing campaigns of the FLN would be portrayed in a way that would provoke a reaction from critics and audiences alike. Through sequences and shots Pontecorvo and Solinas push viewers to take a stance on the matter. But it also becomes about the audience looking at the people who are committing these campaigns of indiscriminant violence. Do they agonize or do they accept this as a consequence of war? The faces shown of the three helpers are pretty ambiguous, and so it becomes about what they observe with who will be the receptors of their actions.

The sequence of the three bombing locations shows each of the three female characters observing the inhabitants of the commercial centers that will be blown up when the bomb goes off. There are shots of carefree teenagers dancing to music, having a good time, laughing, etc. The three female characters look on at each of their locations with a considerable blank expression that has led to a lot of viewer projection of how that character is reacting. Are they coldly looking on, waiting for the kill? Are they all depressed at seeing these youths about to waste away? The camera lingers in such a way that some viewers and critics could consider ambiguous leaving questions on what is going on in the film.

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<sup>30</sup> Hill, Leslie. "Filming Ghosts: French Cinema and the Algerian War." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* Fall 38.3 (1992): pp. 787-804. p. 801 Print.

But it was two shots of a single subject that made the grueling anticipation of the Milk Bar bombing reach a fever pitch. The subject is a little boy eating ice cream. No more than a few seconds later does the bomb go off. The shot of the child before the bombing, according to Pontecorvo, would be the only objection he heard from Algerian authorities that they wished to get expunged from the final cut of the film. The cut of the child would, of course, stay and so would the tragedy of that scene.

Michael Vann wrote that the cycle of violence does alienate viewers and critics alike who cannot really side with either the French or FLN seeing their actions depicted on screen<sup>31</sup>:

“Caught in a cycle of violence, the film depicts police torture, political assassinations, and terrorist bombings of both French and Algerian civilians. While the audience is clearly encouraged to identify with the FLN, the use of violence on both sides of the war appalls many viewers.”

American film critic Andrew Sarris would write in *Politics & Cinema* on watching *The Battle of Algiers* at Lincoln Center and how what he saw on screen and in the audience would repulse him. The screening was largely a black-tie event but the reactions to scenes of terror done by the FLN, according to Sarris, had the audience cheering with an “orgasmic thrill”.<sup>32</sup> For Sarris this was hatefully obscene and he laid blame to what was being done on-screen.

Sarris’ argument indicted the choices by Pontecorvo in making a film that has nobody recognizable or professional actors but rather real people in the bombing scenes. How the bombings were staged on screen, in Sarris’ opinion, was ruthlessly indiscriminate. The closeness to reality in those scenes, in Sarris’ opinion, actually

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<sup>31</sup> Vann, Michael G. “The Colonial Casbah on the Silver Screen: Using P  p   Le Moko and The Battle of Algiers to Teach Colonialism, Race, and Globalization in French History.” *The Colonial Casbah on the Silver Screen: Using P  p   Le Moko and The Battle of Algiers to Teach Colonialism, Race, and Globalization in French History* Spring 83 (2002): pp. 186-92. p. 188. Print.

<sup>32</sup> Sarris, Andrew. *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978. p. 68. Print.



created disconnect with the audience reacting to what was taking place on screen. These were not real people but ‘unpersons’.<sup>33</sup> These ‘unpersons’ being murdered on screen did not cause complicated feelings of pain, loss, or waste for the audience in Sarris’ opinion after with watching a screening of *The Battle of Algiers* viewed the death of the Pied-Noir as an act worth celebrating.

Sarris offers how different the reaction would be if there had been recognizable actors or, getting more personal, projecting your own family member into the scene of the bombing. “Is it still an occasion for cheering? I think not,” Sarris concludes.<sup>34</sup>

It brings back to mind the scene of the child eating ice cream. It is a manipulative shot but could be deemed necessary for the reasons laid out by Sarris. There is no character among the pied-noirs who stands out, who is followed, who is made to compel the audience in any part of the movie. The death of the pied-noirs moves the film along to a crucial point but their perspective is never given life in the movie and their demise can provoke different reactions that even with a shot of child eating ice cream cannot invoke a certain sympathy and innocence.

Another major American film critic Pauline Kael, writing for *The New Yorker* at the time, would credit *The Battle of Algiers* as a politically effective film, in that it did move audiences politically, but above all, it was an achievement in propaganda filmmaking. Kael would personally reject the politics in the film but would rank Pontecorvo with Sergei Eisenstein as somebody who made a political film that hit audiences on an emotional level.<sup>35</sup> Most famously, Pauline Kael would proclaim

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<sup>33</sup> Sarris, pp. 121-122

<sup>34</sup> Sarris, p. 122.

<sup>35</sup> Kael, Pauline, and Will Brantley. *Conversations with Pauline Kael*. Jackson: University of Mississippi, 1996. p. 68. Print.

Pontecorvo's 'burning passion' for effectively acting on the emotions of the audience but in faint praise for what he brought to the screen famously wrote of him as, "He [Pontecorvo] is the most dangerous kind of Marxist: a Marxist poet". Kael, in effect, does agree with Sarris in that *The Battle of Algiers* as "probably the only film that has ever made middle-class audiences believe in the necessity of bombing innocent people."<sup>36</sup> The belief in the necessity of those bombings was indeed considered necessary based on the audience's reception to it that Sarris witnessed but for Sarris he found the film unseemly in how this could elicit a reaction. Kael, on the other hand, praises the reaction the film successfully elicits it in spite of her political difference to the film.

The emotional impact on members of the FLN in committing these acts, are quite split. Zohra Drif saw herself as a part of a war and was doing her duty to fight for her country.<sup>37</sup> Saadi Yacef on the other hand has numerouslly lamented agonizing over these choices though ultimately surmised, "It was a means to an end, and we achieved that end. It's such a vicious cycle. It's not a personal evil.... I was fighting for a cause."<sup>38</sup>

For many viewers of the film, there is the underlying issue of the massive loss of life being used. There was belief that the FLN was just cold-blooded, calculating, that violence against civilians was carried out in the knowledge that retaliation would be disproportionately harsh, creating an increasing divide.<sup>39</sup> People were expendable for the FLN and not just for the other side but their own side was also expendable. Inter-group

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<sup>36</sup> Addiego, Walter. "A Popular Uprising, as Potent as Ever." *The San Francisco Chronicle*. Hearst Corporation, 13 Feb. 2004. Web. 11 Jan. 2012. <<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2004/02/13/DDG7L4V45E1.DTL>>.

<sup>37</sup> "Remembering History", DVD.

<sup>38</sup> "Remembering History", DVD.

<sup>39</sup> Margerrison, p. 430.

violence in the war lead to somewhere between 300,000-1,500,000 casualties of Algerians compared to just 18,000 French.<sup>40</sup> The killing of Ramdane Abane when the group felt he put himself above the collective is one major example. Ramdane eerily remains present in *The Battle of Algiers* with many of his issued pro-resistance statements against the French heard over the radio broadcasts in the Casbah.

So while Ramdane has his written word spoke on-screen, he has no face or voice. Then there are the faceless who have no voice in the pied-noirs. And there are the French who have neither in the film beyond Col. Mathieu.

## **V. The Portrayal of the Pied Noir and the French**

The Fourth Republic declared that success in the Algerian War would be conditional to "the destiny of France."<sup>41</sup> The War would soon come to France with café wars and terrorism.

The Algerian immigrant population in France also took sides. Hadj's MNA largely composed of the proletariat in Paris while the FLN's building networks in France were growing, with many seeing rapid changes. Simone de Beauvoir wrote of her French neighborhood<sup>42</sup>:

"Leather jacketed North Africans, looking very well-groomed, began to frequent the Café de Amis; all alcohol was forbidden; through the windows I could see the customers sitting down in front of glasses of milk. No more brawls at night. The discipline had been imposed by the FLN."

The FLN in France went by Le Federation de France. While not intending on engaging in full-scale war in France it was intent on swaying the Algerian immigrant

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<sup>40</sup> Dingeman, Jim. "'You Cannot Continually Inflict': An Interview with Saadi Yacef." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* Fall 49.2 (2008): pp. 46-64. p. 48. Print.

<sup>41</sup> Ministère de l'Algérie, Action du gouvernement en Algérie: Mesures de pacification et réformes (Algiers: Service de l'Information du Cabinet du Ministère de l'Algérie, October 1957), 18.

<sup>42</sup> Horne, p. 236.

population for support and funding as well as sabotage the return of de Gaulle in power after the fall of Guy Mollet and the Fourth Republic. Le Federation de France concentrated on recruiting Algerian soldiers of the French Army to join the FLN and also to 'liquidate' the MNA up to the top with Hadj. The MNA despite losing its political clout in Algeria remained a major adversary of the FLN. But the FLN reign of terror resulted in hundreds dead out of 250,000 immigrant population proved to be effective. The fundraising was successful and the French authorities were still perplexed, unable to catch or get good information about the terror attacks. French authorities turned to loyalists (commonly derided as harkis) would with their cooperation infiltrate the FLN. Fundraising was cut off successfully but dozens of harkis would die. The total amount of casualties in the café wars is estimated to be around 6,000 between the groups.

The situation in Algeria also provoked members of the pied-noir population to take to France with the creation of an ultra-reactionary terrorist group, the Organisation Armee Secrete (OAS) created by officers of the French military. Gaullist leaders and de Gaulle himself became a target. Jean-Paul Sartre's apartment would later be bombed with OAS being held responsible that continued well after the war had ended. Any individual or organization that was found hostile to their cause was a target for a bombing or execution.

It is understandable that these outside stories would not have fit within the Algerian context of the film. Any outside news in the film came from the radios or were personified by the group of reporters asking questions to Col. Mathieu and Ben M'Hidi. There is also the fact the terror inflicted by the OAS would tonally be out of step with the

story Solinas and Pontecorvo were telling. Terror comes in the form of resistance born out of oppression. But then who are these pied-noir reactionaries?

The premise of *The Battle of Algiers* portrays an unbridgeable divide between the French and North African Algerians. There was, of course, risk to any pied-noir who so much as frequented among Algerians just as there was always risk for any North African Algerian, torture and killing the biggest risks. But there is nothing in Pontecorvo's film that presents there to be any coexistence going on at the time, but many accounts of the War in Algeria had French-born journalists and academics, embedded with major figures of the FLN, including Saadi Yacef.

French ethnographer Germaine Tillion was one of the closest French citizens to the FLN on the ground. Though once active in the French resistance during World War II under the French Vichy government she, however, was not taken by the revolution and resistance spirit as Pontecorvo. She wrote on the severe impoverishments in the rural areas that were moving to the city, the social realities that she believed were the direct cause of the war.<sup>43</sup> Tillion saw more complexities to the region to the point she could not emphatically support any side. She said in an interview to Allison Rice<sup>44</sup>:

"As soon as I became familiar with Algeria and its complexity, I realized that it was necessary to give to each person the right to live. And this individual right to live demanded that others be allowed to live as well. But it is certain that the situations were very complex. For instance, you are acquainted with Saliha Abdellatif, a woman of Kabyle origin whose family was in the war against the FLN. It is important to note that the harkis, cursed by all others, are also very numerous, and the situation was not simple. At the heart of the FLN itself, there were three or four wars. In reaction to this complexity, I say: leave them alone, give them some peace! But it's difficult. These are not easy questions."

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<sup>43</sup> Rice, Alison. "'Déchiffrer Le Silence': A Conversation with Germaine Tillion." *Research in African Literatures* Spring 35.1 (2004): pp.162-79. p. 162 Print.

<sup>44</sup> Rice, p. 175.

Tillion drove to the point of their needing to be reconciliation but grew equally critical of the French para and the FLN as well as the French state. She disagreed with the theories of Fanon that violence is a provocation from colonialism, but even when she personally confided to Ali LaPointe and Saadi Yacef personally about the bombings, she is told it is a necessity. But she found Yacef to be a man who was disturbed by the violence of his own methods. Initially she and Yacef worked on a plan that if she would pass on to the French ministers that the FLN would stop bombing if the French agreed to not guillotine FLN members.<sup>45</sup> It did not work but not because of the FLN's doing but of the fact the French military refused to have the government and more guillotine executions continued. Again, this work of diplomacy, albeit dubious in its effect, is not shown in the film.

There is a point a conscious point made by Pontecorvo and Solinas to make the film a condemnation of the French state against colonialism and not any individuals, particularly the French para. Pontecorvo states<sup>46</sup>:

“About the repressive forces, we tried to present the paratroopers as normal – not maniacs, sadists, or exceptional cases, let's call them products of rational, supercivilized France – because we meant our condemnation to reach beyond them to the political machine itself. In effect it becomes a historical condemnation of those men behind the paras – of colonialism itself. . . . I wanted the paras to look like Martians – an irresistible, rhythmical, invading force whose arrival changes the balance of power.”

Fanon was an obvious influence on the making of the picture but for Fanon had many champions in the West, specifically French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre. Sartre had become an outspoken critic of French colonialism and the Algerian War to the point he is referenced in *The Battle of Algiers* during the scene of Col. Mathieu taking

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<sup>45</sup> Morgan, Ted. *My Battle of Algiers: A Memoir*. New York: Smithsonian /Collins, 2005. pp. 211-212. Print.

<sup>46</sup> “Pontecorvo: The Dictatorship of Truth”, DVD.

questions from reporters. When a reporter quotes Sartre, Mathieu complains, "Why are the Sartres always born on the other side?" Asked if he dislikes Sartre in a follow-up question, Mathieu says, "No, but I like him even less as an enemy." It remarked on how a military man viewed an intellectual in just a few lines of dialogue.

Sartre wrote in the preface for Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* remarking that any French passivity on the Algerian question was on the levels of the very oppressors of the Algerians and that non-violence was an unreasonable approach lending to the passivity. Sartre not only saw decolonization is occurring in Africa but in every country, especially France, with every individual a is having a part of them, their 'settler' being rooted out of them because of how out of step the practice has become. Sartre writes<sup>47</sup>:

"You know well enough that we are exploiters. You know too that we have laid hands on first the gold and metals, then the petroleum of the 'new continents', and that we have brought them back to the old countries. This was not without excellent results, as witness our palaces, our cathedrals and our great industrial cities; and then when there was the threat of a slump, the colonial markets were there to soften the blow or to divert it. Crammed with riches, Europe accorded the human status *de jure* to its inhabitants. With us, to be a man is to be an accomplice of colonialism, since all of us without exception have profited by colonial exploitation. This fat, pale continent ends by falling into what Fanon rightly calls narcissism. Cocteau became irritated with Paris — 'that city which talks about itself the whole time'. Is Europe any different? And that super-European monstrosity, North America? Chatter, chatter: liberty, equality, fraternity, love, honour, patriotism and what have you. All this did not prevent us from making anti-racial speeches about dirty niggers, dirty Jews and dirty Arabs. High-minded people, liberal or just soft-hearted, protest that they were shocked by such inconsistency; but they were either mistaken or dishonest, for with us there is nothing more consistent than a racist humanism since the European has only been able to become a man through creating slaves and monsters. While there was a native population somewhere this imposture was not shown up; in the notion of the human race we found an abstract assumption of universality which served as cover for the most realistic practices. On the other side of the ocean there was a race of less-than-humans who, thanks to us, might reach our status a thousand years hence, perhaps; in short, we mistook the elite for the genus. Today, the native populations reveal their true nature, and at the same time our exclusive 'club' reveals its weakness — that it's neither more nor less than a minority. Worse than that: since the others become men in name against us, it seems that we are the enemies of

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<sup>47</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. "Preface." *The Wretched of the Earth*. By Frantz Fanon. New York: Grove, 1961. p. lviii. Print.

mankind; the *élite* shows itself in its true colours — it is nothing more than a gang. Our precious sets of values begin to moults; on closer scrutiny you won't see one that isn't stained with blood. If you are looking for an example, remember these fine words: 'How generous France is!' Us, generous? What about Sétif, then? And those eight years of ferocious war which have cost the lives of over a million Algerians? And the tortures?"

Sartre and other French intellectuals were aware of the injustices of colonialism and the hypocrisies of nations in power. Such criticisms promoted the idea that these colonialist nations have what is coming to them as oppressors with the war against all mankind rather than sovereignty.

For the French intelligentsia this war became a very personal time of reflection and guilt. The stories of atrocities with torture were coming out of left-wing French publications like *Les Temps Modernes*. Simone de Beauvoir would describe a war that shook the foundation of her French identity, "my own situation with regard to my country, to the world, to myself, was shattered by it all".<sup>48</sup> Her work with Djamila Boupacha, an Algerian woman raped and sodomized by French soldiers, would help highlight and enlighten the French public opinion but Beauvoir would butt heads with Gisele Halimi for not doing enough, particularly with staying silent as many felt she was forced back to Algeria against her will. Boupacha's situation called into question whether or not Beauvoir was objectifying Boupacha for a cause, rather than see her as a person- a charge led by Boupacha's lawyer Gisele Halimi, who took up several torture cases involving Algeria.<sup>49</sup> But Halimi's criticisms of Beauvoir ignore the extensive written attacks Beauvoir made against colonialism and how colonialism itself objectified Arabs.

Boupacha may have been as an allegory for the Arab experience by Beauvoir and

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<sup>48</sup> Kruks, p. 188.

<sup>49</sup> Kruks, p. 195.



others but Beauvoir's writings, like Sartre, pointed to that inaction is complicit to freedom. "When the government of a country allows crimes to be committed in its name, every citizen thereby becomes a member of a collectively criminal nation."<sup>50</sup> France is implicated in the rape of Boupacha, as are the citizens of France who if they are not moved into action by reading about Boupacha are also guilty of the crimes against her and other Algerians.

There were questions about the ideological and personal feelings among the French intelligentsia coalescing and clashing on the subject of Algeria. There was indeed a side of the French intelligentsia that preferred resolution rather than war. The most vocal would be Algerian-born pied-noir author Albert Camus. Camus broke with much of the French intellectual left, most prominently with his former close colleague Sartre they had officially split on the Cold War. Camus being a pied-noir made his views on the Algerian question with all sorts of biases but also had insights in providing the voice to the pied-noir. The pied-noir only supported the French inasmuch to protect their interests in Algeria. Camus believed neither side could ever really see anything but the "truth" to their cause.<sup>51</sup> That is why no such alternative choices can exist in the minds of the French and FLN without serving the cause of the opposite side. Essentially, he may have found colonialism deplorable but not in a way that could have the oppression of colonialism react in taking lives and joining resistance and revolutionary movements that supported violence.

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<sup>50</sup> Beauvoir, Simone De, and Gisèle Halimi. *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl Which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*. New York: Macmillan, 1962. p. 197. Print.

<sup>51</sup> Carroll, David. "The End(s) of the Intellectual: Ethics, Politics, Terror." *South Central Review* Fall 25.3 (2008): pp. 106-25. p. 118. Print.

For Camus with Algeria he saw a cycle of violence that equally implicated the terror of the FLN and the counter-terrorism of the French. He could not support the FLN or an independent Algeria but he also did not support the status quo. In defending his stance against an Algerian student in 1957, Camus says<sup>52</sup>:

“I have always supported a just Algeria, where the two populations must live in peace and equality. I have said and repeated that we have to bring justice to the Algerian people and grant them a fully democratic regime . . . I have always condemned terror. I must also condemn a terrorism that is practiced blindly in the streets of Algiers, for example, and which could strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice.”

Camus repeatedly and repeatedly call for a non-violent solution to spare human lives. He believed the deaths of civilians as an acceptable means to an end no matter which side was inflicting it. But his hopes would fall on deaf ears. Many people regarded Camus’ attitude on the matter to be an unrepentant colonialist or a nostalgic imperialist.<sup>53</sup> His reputation had become damaged based on willful reticence toward the pleas of Algerian secession from French rule.

The French intelligentsia or the moral or ethical conflicts of their country are appropriately not on screen. The film skips the January 8<sup>th</sup>, 1961 French referendum voting in the majority, 75% of the vote, for Algeria’s right to self-determination, a vote that the FLN openly boycotted. The French public opinion was important and influential but it was not the deciding factor. From the FLN point of view, the French have no right to be voting on the rights of Algerians. *The Battle of Algiers* is not about the French story and it is clear that Solinas and Pontecorvo chose a point of view for the film. But there is also the story of the pied-noirs. They are in many respects cast aside and when on screen placed as objects or triggers for the film’s plot and characters. Ali LaPointe does not go

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<sup>52</sup> Carroll, p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> Carroll, pp. 120-121.

to jail and become an FLN leader without assaulting a pied-noir. The bombings of pied-noir establishments is what the FLN a serious threat to French colonialism. But there is never a pied-noir character fully fleshed out.

In some respects the best way to represent the pied-noirs in *The Battle of Algiers* is through not really showing them at all, but at a distance and pulled back into the action by being caught between colonialism and resistance. They are not to be blamed for the privileges they reaped in the colonial period. The pied-noirs were in fact largely distant from the majority population who understood little about these people. To show an exception with a pro-FLN pied-noir on screen would be largely untrue and to show any character defending colonialism would be a useless exercise based the amount of oppression Pontecorvo shows that immediately refutes colonialism as a practice.

#### **VI. The Portrayal of Torture in *The Battle of Algiers***

Torture in the French-Algeria War became a major topic of discussion and for the government, incendiary. The banning of Henri Alleg's book *La Question* exemplified how difficult it was to talk about torture. Alleg, a journalist, had been captured and tortured by the French in order to give up what he knew about the rebels. He refused to cooperate and was sent to recuperate at a hospital and eventually was released but he also smuggled his account of his time at the Barberousse Prison in Algiers. He recounted his personal inflictions of electrical torture and other cellmates, including females, receiving similar tortures of electric and water torture, all of which are shown in *The Battle of Algiers* film, in addition to be insulted and assaulted by torturers.<sup>54</sup> The gruesome descriptions of the inflictions of torture faced by Alleg, such as electrical wire in his teeth, marked a work of proof that the French tortured readily available to the French

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<sup>54</sup> Lezra, Jacques. "Sade on Pontecorvo." *Discourse* Fall 25.3 (2003): pp. 48-75. p. 64. Print.

public. 60,000 copies were purchased before the ban and the ban only made the book more desirable.<sup>55</sup>

There are questions raised about the way torture is depicted in *The Battle of Algiers* that raises certain paradoxes. For something so awful as torture is, it is a practice being shown as something that essentially works in the favor of the French, a key to their short-lived victory, and that is forgiven because the Algerian revolt transcends torture to win the war in unifying fashion.

Leslie Hill writes on the scenes of torture and how Mathieu justifies it followed by Pontecorvo's depiction of suffering<sup>56</sup>:

"Mathieu points out that the real argument here is not about the use of torture but about the political objectives of the French state: whoever wills the end must will the means. To endorse French colonial rule is in itself, Mathieu argues, already to justify in advance the use of all necessary methods, including torture. The torture scene that immediately follows offers a political gloss on these words as Pontecorvo demonstrates the awful pain they imply for the bodies of those involved in the struggle. "

There is diegetic sound removed in the scenes of torture with the organ lamenting the dehumanization on screen. It clearly marks human suffering in torture as wrong and inhumane. There is one brief shot of a French para inflicting torture that shows exhaustion. It could be a takeoff on the writings of Fanon treating French torturers as his own patients during the war, how they too were inflicted as much as their victims. But torture in *The Battle of Algiers* consequently becomes a practice that is portrayed with a certain degree of effectiveness that makes the film problematic for many.

Darius Rejali points to the fact that the film has become in many respects a direct source for 'torture apologists' in the West as a counter against the arguments of torture.

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<sup>55</sup>Davis, Colin. "Renoir and the Vichy Syndrome: This Land Is Mine, Carola and Le Caporal épinglé." *South Central Review* Fall 28.3 (2011): pp. 45-62. p. 59. Print.

<sup>56</sup> Hill, pp. 799-800.

Rejali points to the notion in the film depicting that the French used torture as a means of intelligence gathering and that it was successful. Torture in the film leads to the French finding the hideout of Ali LaPointe whose death effectively ends the Battle of Algiers. But the truth of what led the French to find Ali LaPointe is complicated. There are those who point to Yacef as the man responsible for Ali LaPointe being given up to French authorities.<sup>57</sup> Rejali downplays those speculations because of the five-week gap between Yacef's arrest and LaPointe getting raided.<sup>58</sup> Rejali points to that even if it that were true, Yacef was not tortured and widely reported to cooperated with authorities.

Rejali offers the reasoning for why the French were victors in the Battle of Algiers, lack of informants and geography working against them. Rejali quotes General Jacques Massu who stated how in the fighting in Vietnam the amount of informants had the Vietnamese knowing about everything the French were planning. There was no such structure for the FLN and could never figure out what the French army was doing. Rejali says the French used their supremacy on the region by issuing identity cards to the entire population. The Casbah, unlike Vietnam, was a very compressed area that was easy to control, unlike the mountains and countryside of Algeria that the French never managed to gain control over. The system in the Casbah was efficient with wardens of different blocks cooperatively giving any information useful to the French.

Torture in Algeria was not just inefficient when obtaining reliable information. Torture became incredibly counter-productive to the French cause. Saadi Yacef has gone on said that torture 'worked' only to further the cause for the FLN, "At the time, if I had had the money, I would have paid the French soldiers so that they would torture

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<sup>57</sup> Morgan, p. 265.

<sup>58</sup> Rejali, Darius. *Torture and Democracy*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 2007. p. 490. Print.

Algerians. Why? Because when an Algerian dies as result of torture, he has ten to twenty relatives who will avenge his death and join the FLN.”<sup>59</sup>

There was also incompetency. The French ordered captured FLN members to name the names of the MNA. Why would the French go after the MNA? The French assumed a more generalized, homogenous Algerian nationalism, unbeknownst to them that these two groups hated each other and the FLN would willfully spill the names of the MNA. The FLN saw the opportunity to shake the foundations to the MNA knowing fully well that members would be tortured and would likely be unable to have their more cooperative viewpoint afterward. The ‘middle’ in terms of the opposition and support of the French would be virtually destroyed through the Battle of Algiers. The FLN became the group of the masses when there were no other alternatives. They were too powerful and too willing to fight back.

Pontecorvo shows the French at nearly at a level of hyper-incompetence when their tactics, in fact, showed they were eliminating any support on the ground by Algerians. France would win the Battle of Algiers by superior force and manpower, but not successful in intelligence gathering.

According to Rejali the only piece of shocking information that the French ever gained through detaining an Algerian was not that this person knew the location of an FLN leader but that the French government had been in secret negotiations of a peace settlement with the FLN, forever shaking the trust the pied-noirs and many generals had of Charles de Gaulle.<sup>60</sup> The French knew exactly where FLN leaders were hiding so this

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<sup>59</sup> Dingeman, Jim. ""You Cannot Continually Inflict": An Interview with Saadi Yacef." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media* Fall 49.2 (2008): pp. 46-64. p. 57. Print.

<sup>60</sup> Rejali, Daris. "Does Torture Work?" *Does Torture Work?* Salon Media Group, 21 June 2004. Web. 04 Feb. 2012. <[http://www.salon.com/2004/06/21/torture\\_algiers/singleton/](http://www.salon.com/2004/06/21/torture_algiers/singleton/)>.

information was old. This fact takes away from the major plot of the French side in the film, killing the head of the tapeworm.

Col. Mathieu explains the mission to eliminate the entire structure of the FLN leadership, down tactically meaning once the last 'head' is eliminated, the FLN is effectively powerless and the battle is over. Mathieu implores that groups like the FLN are like tapeworms, to officially kill it the 'head' must be destroyed. The structure of the FLN in the film is shown to be in terror cells, meaning a certain leader likely knows only as much as a few other leaders, that while making it unclear to members of the number of insurgents it confuses their enemies even more so.

This did not mean there was not betrayal and collaboration happening, in fact according to Rejali that was the real story happening in the Battle of Algiers. Not torture, that Rejali believes is the great lie about in the film. That torture won the battle in France rather than the war is an oversimplification of a lie, in Rejali's mind. *The Battle of Algiers* clings to the notion that the people united behind the FLN, giving it popular support, but managed to lose anyway the conclusion would have to be that the torture that results in information gathered by the French in the film, won them the battle.

The realities as noted are more gray and complex. The story of torture during the war shows infliction on both sides. But we never fully see the guilt and wounded nature of the torturers with exception to exhaustion. Pontecorvo does not play up the sadistic nature of torture but a very systematic, professional, controlled, and cold kind of torture. Paras look on at the acts of their colleagues stone faced and with no real focus on them in the main action. Torture used by the French, however, was done as a form of humiliation to their victims, to remind them that they were the accomplices of the FLN as

Algerians and must submit. This was clumsy. Even Colonel Marcel Bigeard, who would be the real-life model for Colonel Mathieu in the film, would assert, “Infiltration and information obtained spontaneously from the population are the most useful methods. I repeat, the use of pushed interrogations [torture] is only valuable if one is dealing with someone who is certainly guilty and if the information can immediately be exploited.”<sup>61</sup> This may have sounded good in theory but under the French, every Algerian was a suspect, everybody taken in to custody had to talk, many through the coercion of torture, and many false leads resulted from these interrogations.

Torture resulted in very rarely successful. Most information was too late to act on. An interrogator is quoted by Alistair Horne saying: “From a purely intelligence point of view, more often than not the collating services are overwhelmed by a mountain of false information extorted from victims desperate to save themselves from further agony.”<sup>62</sup> Regular police work and suspects willing to talk earlier without coercion was the far more effective tool in getting information.

Torture is shown as an awful thing in *The Battle of Algiers* but showing that it proved to be a method that led to the demise of Ali LaPointe raises questions. So if it is so awful, how could it work? Showing that the French essentially won The Battle of Algiers through torture is a lie that comes from the impulse to tie the film together. We see Ali LaPointe in hiding and near the end we see his demise but ultimately end with an uprising to show that it is not the head of the snake but the people. The film indeed simplifies a lot of the background and ordeals that led to the FLN defeat and should be properly be shown while applying the correct historical context.

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<sup>61</sup> Rejali, p. 488.

<sup>62</sup> Horne, pp. 204-205.



## **VII. Conclusion**

*The Battle of Algiers* from a historical perspective does provide the view with a lot of attention to detail but it is a very simplistic in representing the national liberation struggle within Algeria and among the major groups, such as the FLN and MNA. Also missing is the French perspective be it in leadership circles or the intellectual circles that showed sympathy to the Algerian cause. The pied-noirs, although present in the film, are not provided any real depth or nuance aside from being portrayed also as victims within the cycle of violence in the colonial struggles. Yet while terrorism is justified so is torture as a horrific thing that still gets reliable information from suspects. Rejali reflects that with *The Battle of Algiers* shaped and reflected the memory and discussion about torture in modern times in a powerful way. “Too often,” he writes, “recollect not actual events but these cultural artifacts.”<sup>63</sup> The themes of the film consciously are done to portray a unified force against colonialism in the urban context and with that there is historical context missing for the viewer.

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<sup>63</sup> Rejali, p. 525

## ***Chapter 4 How The Battle of Algiers Has Been Used And Been an Influence Over Time***

### **I. A Film of the New Left**

Solinas and Pontecorvo each devoted themselves to the political left brought those experiences to their films with *The Battle of Algiers* as the most prominent example. As Professor of History Donald Reid noted, “For screenwriter Solinas, *The Battle of Algiers* was the quintessential New Left film: the revolution, thwarted by working-class integration in Europe, was possible in the Third World and would lead to the demise of capitalism in the First World.”<sup>1</sup>

*The Battle of Algiers* was released after the most major decolonization and before the major outbreaks of civil unrest largely in the West. People, many of them young students, protested the foreign involvement in the Vietnam War that reached a fever pitch with the global 1968 protests. The old order was seen as out of fashion with youth of the period and so alternatives emerged with radical methods. New Left Groups such as the Black Panthers and the Weathermen in the United States, the Baader-Meinhof Gang (or Red Army Faction) in West Germany, the Red Brigade in Italy, and the more international the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) came to form not long after the release of the film.

The film gained major notoriety for being screened by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the Black Panthers allegedly for the use as a training tool or training manual. One radical group had a promotion poster for a screening of the film in big bold capital

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<sup>1</sup> Reid, Donald. "Re-viewing The Battle of Algiers with Germaine Tillion." *History Workshop Journal* Autumn 60 (2005): pp. 93-115. p. 98. Print.

letters said the film was, “A BLUEPRINT FOR A REVOLUTION” and listing the figures ranging from Eldridge Cleaver to J. Edgar Hoover as people who have seen the film.<sup>2</sup>

This is the dark side of “The Dictatorship of Truth”. The film’s raw actuality of the events in Algiers that became largely seen as the double for real events with such fine attention to detail that it emerged as a template to commit acts not in colonial North Africa but across the West.

What appealed to the New Left in *The Battle of Algiers* is its obviously ideological alliance and reliance to the works of Frantz Fanon, a patron saint to many radical groups such as the Black Panthers. These First World radical groups read these Third World intellectuals and their theories of decolonization, believing that it could take form in places like France, West Germany, the United States, and wherever there was a radical presence in the First World. Algeria the event becomes more than an example but an ideal in ridding the colonialist past and presence while maintaining a single political party, the FLN, that operates as a functioning New Left party. The film shows that before leading an independent nation that the FLN was an influence to Algerians as a functionary civil authority, as shown in the wedding in addition to be a militant group with popular support.

For these radical groups they saw *The Battle of Algiers*, the film, as a potential spark to their sectarian drive. On one hand the film shows the techniques of a revolutionary cause in the FLN’s terrorist campaign. But as noted before in earlier chapters, the film does not glorify terrorism. The film, in fact, also presents the supposed

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<sup>2</sup> “The Battle of Algiers: A Case Study”. *The Battle of Algiers*. Dir. Gillo Pontecorvo. Casbah Films, 1966. DVD, Criterion Collection, 2004, Disc 3.

effectiveness of the French military's counter-terrorism campaign. That portrayal of the French actually makes it very appealing for these groups in seeing how each side operates and what the mistakes led to one side losing the battle and the other side effectively losing the war. The French are portrayed as coldly rational helps get the point across of what is considered effective and not effective for them. For the French it becomes about connecting the dots, "We do not know who they are because they do not know each other", Colonel Mathieu summarizes about the FLN's apparatus in Algiers. As noted by Philip Roberts, the film shows the audience the difficulties in the effectiveness of the French counter-operations in that the enemy is never seen in the act<sup>3</sup>:

"The terrorist must remain invisible, mount his attack then slip out of sight forcing the authorities into a constant state of defense, unable to mount any effective counter-operations. By observing the unfolding terrorist campaign the audience becomes aware of the difficulties faced by the counter-terrorist forces, and of the need for effective and rapidly collected military information."

It is never obvious on who the enemy looks like. The sequence of the three women dressed up as the European ideal planting the bombs being an obvious example of how they become invisible by looking not as an 'other' but as just another face in the crowd who can just go past checkpoints and slip a bag that holds a bomb at a commercial center successfully. It leads to the need for interrogation in gathering information and intelligence, the few instances where the alleged terrorist and the police can come face to face. It becomes about maintaining information and intelligence for the French para as a police body than a military body. The French can no longer bomb around the Casbah that has only led to a longer vicious cycle of violence despite the intention of using bombs to prevent further violence. These bombings only served to reinforce the authority

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<sup>3</sup> Roberts, Phillip. "The Battle of Algiers (La Battaglia di Algeri)." *Scope: An Online Journal of Film & TV Studies*; Department of Culture, Film, and Media, *University of Nottingham* October 9 (2007). Online.

of the FLN. The film shows the transition into the personal infliction against individuals by the French through interrogation and torture but the people prevail in their undying support of the FLN, which is what primarily makes the film so attractive to leftists.

Yet these groups never succeeded in bringing urban guerrilla warfare to the West or successfully getting the people to their side. Saadi Yacef in an interview remarked on the phases of urban guerrilla warfare being divided into three phases: first, stating your identity to be heard; second, organize in order to carry out a war; and third, launching an insurrection after occupying a conquered territory.<sup>4</sup> Waging combat in guerrilla warfare contain no training manuals or teaching methods, according to Yacef. He considered the film being used as a training manual as “naïve” and showing a “lack of perceptiveness” in radical groups applying their experience to the situation of the FLN.<sup>5</sup>

The depiction of terrorism in *The Battle of Algiers* is terrorism of a national liberation that galvanizes the public and forced a reaction by the police and military. France fell into the trap set by the FLN. Reacting with reprisals and military tactics rather than a political solution with the Algerian people did the French in. It was not just about planting bombings but with the help of the French government bungling their reaction the FLN had the people come to their side, aware and in agreement with liberating themselves from France. No radical group aside from the IRA listed ever truly galvanized the masses in the fashion of the FLN in Algeria. Namely because the colonial struggle was a system that could not be defended in any way by the French whose campaign in Algiers had become too focused on military tactics. The struggles the New Left identified in their countries and regions did not galvanize the public or provoke the

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<sup>4</sup> Crowdus, Gary. "Terrorism and Torture in *The Battle of Algiers*: An Interview with Saadi Yacef." *Cineaste* Summer 29.3 (2004): 36. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Crowdus, p. 36.

government into a reaction that could further galvanize the public into siding with the groups and their tactics.

*The Battle of Algiers* has also gained considerable amount of attention and study in international policy. The film was no longer just viewed and studied by the radicals but by those in power, even those who had previously been the targets of these radicals.

## **II. The Contemporary Revisiting of the Film**

*"How to win a battle against terrorism and lose the war of ideas. ... Children shoot soldiers at point blank range. Women plant bombs in cafes. Soon the entire Arab population builds to a mad fervor. Sound familiar? The French have a plan. It succeeds tactically, but fails strategically. To understand why, come to a rare showing of this film."*

-A flier for the Pentagon screening for *The Battle of Algiers*

The United States Defense Department's Directorate for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict, a civilian-led group who specializes in the understanding of guerrilla warfare, came up with the idea believing that the film "offers historical insight into the conduct of French operations in Algeria, and was intended to prompt informative discussion of the challenges faced by the French."<sup>6</sup> The revelation of the August 27<sup>th</sup>, 2003 screening at the Army Auditorium at the Pentagon was revealed in David Ignatius' op-ed in *The Washington Post* the day before. Ignatius celebrated this news as "a hopeful sign that the military is thinking creatively and unconventionally about Iraq."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Kaufman, Michael T. "The World: Film Studies; What Does the Pentagon See in 'Battle of Algiers'?" *The New York Times*. The New York Times Company, 7 Sept. 2003. Web. 30 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/09/07/weekinreview/the-world-film-studies-what-does-the-pentagon-see-in-battle-of-algiers.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>>.

<sup>7</sup> Ignatius, David. "Think Strategy, Not Numbers." *The Washington Post*. The Washington Post Company, 26 Aug. 2003. Web. 28 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A45136-2003Aug25.html>>.

Immediately there was great reaction to the news of this screening from both the film circle and the political circle. It reignited old debates and critiques of the film while also led to a revisiting of the film based on how politically relevant it became, leading to the film being transferred to DVD as a new edition to the Criterion Collection in 2004. Theatrical re-releases occurred in the United States, United Kingdom, and France.

*The Battle of Algiers* and the French-Algerian War itself had been used as a correlation to the War in Iraq. In some ways, however, the interpretation of how the wars are analogous to each other cut in different ways with many critics of the war finding troubling similarities. Former United States National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski found the situation in Algeria and specifically the film to show the Bush White House current in a pre-de Gaulle mode of stubbornly trying to control the region<sup>8</sup>:

“If you want some analogy, I would say a closer analogy is that of Algeria, in the waning days of the war that the Algerians were waging against the French. Until de Gaulle came to power, the government was getting all the time the same kind of advice we now are hearing about the situation in Iraq. It may get better. Yes, three years have been wasted, but maybe we can go on for another three years. And we're going to do better; we're going to control Algiers.

There's a wonderful movie called "The Battle of Algiers," which shows what happened when the effort was made finally just to control Algiers. I'm afraid the battle for Baghdad is, in many ways, reminiscent of the battle for Algiers.

And then a man came along, de Gaulle, who instead of listening to the same degree of timid consensus -- "Gee, we are stuck, but we don't know what to do, so let's continue being stuck and maybe we'll win" -- he realized that this is a wrong war.”

The quagmire that Brzezinski illustrates as Iraq being analogous to Algeria consciously ignores the nature of why the United States is in Iraq versus why the French was in Algeria. One was a war of choice pushed as war of necessity while the other was

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<sup>8</sup> Lehrer, J. (2004, June 14). President's Baghdad Trip Sparks U.S. Iraq Policy Debate [Television transcript]. *PBS News Hour*. [Online].

maintaining not just a colony but as an integral part of France. Brzezinski, of course, is not concentrating on the 'why' for both countries being there, but connecting the 'how' in getting out with cooler heads prevailing in leadership that he believes the United States lacked.

Lefist intellectual Tariq Ali wrote about the screening in a 2003 piece in *The Guardian*<sup>9</sup>:

"At least the Pentagon understands that the resistance in Iraq is following a familiar anti-colonial pattern. In the movie, they would have seen acts carried out by the Algerian maquis almost half a century ago, which could have been filmed in Fallujah or Baghdad last week. Then, as now, the occupying power described all such activities as "terrorist". Then, as now, prisoners were taken and tortured, houses that harboured them or their relatives were destroyed, and repression was multiplied."

Christopher Hitchens, however, found the analogy to be flawed. However significant the French military victory was it was insignificant due to the unpopular opinion of the war in Algeria and France. Hitchens further writes<sup>10</sup>:

"Today, it is Arab nationalism that is in crisis, while the political and economic and military power of the United States is virtually unchallengeable. But the comparison of historical context, while decisive, is not the only way in which the Iraq analogy collapses. The French could not claim to have removed a tyrannical and detested leader. They could not accuse the Algerian nationalists of sponsoring international terrorism (indeed, they blamed Gamal Abdel Nasser in Egypt for fomenting the FLN in Algiers itself). They could not make any case that Algerian nationalism would violate the Non-Proliferation Treaty or even threaten to do so. Thus, French conscripts—not volunteers—and Algerian rebels were sacrificed for no cause except the lost and futile one of French reaction. The right-wing generals of the Algeria campaign, and some of the extreme settlers, actually did conduct an urban guerrilla rearguard action of their own, in Paris as well as Algeria, and did try to bring off a military coup against de Gaulle, but they had been defeated and isolated by 1968."

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<sup>9</sup> Ali, Tariq. "Resistance Is the First Step Towards Iraqi Independence." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 02 Nov. 2003. Web. 18 Nov. 2011.

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2003/nov/03/iraq.comment>>.

<sup>10</sup> Hitchens, Christopher. "Why the War in Iraq Is Nothing like The Battle of Algiers." *Slate Magazine*. The Slate Group, 2 Jan. 2004. Web. 07 Feb. 2012.

<[http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/fighting\\_words/2004/01/guerrillas\\_in\\_the\\_mist.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/fighting_words/2004/01/guerrillas_in_the_mist.html)>.



Hitchens saw more of the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s- that had the FLN fighting for its survival against the Islamic jihadist group the FIS (Front Islamique du Salut or the Islamic Salvation Front)- to be more applicable to Iraq rather than the French-Algerian War or *The Battle of Algiers* that he considers a masterpiece but “outdated” in its revolutionary spirit. But the way the film can be seen is as an observer of terrorism and counter-terrorism. What are the mistakes, what are the tactics that work, and what response should be given? These are the questions that pervade the mind a viewer who works in the field of global intervention, watching the film in a post-colonial mindset look at parts of the film from the perspective of the French. These people see indiscriminant terrorism and they see things in the film that do relate to their own experiences in fighting modern, indiscriminant terrorism, but there are of course differences.

The film transformed into a film about terrorism and connecting the current situation of the War in Iraq of the post-colonial 21<sup>st</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial period of the French-Algerian War. The terrorism behind Algeria is, of course, different from Iraq. Although there is a majority Muslim population in Algeria and that segment of the Muslim population saw kicking out the French as a ‘purification’ of their land, the terrorism in *The Battle of Algiers* is grounded in national liberation- not Islamic fundamentalism.

In some ways the film’s screening at the Pentagon could be looked at as not as different as the New Left groups screening the film. It is about understanding terrorism, counter-terrorism, and the other side. Yet the Pentagon has to identify themselves with the French, the losers of the War. But looking at *The Battle of Algiers* is about looking

at the failures and ultimately about changing the ending rather than look at the triumphs of the FLN.

Film critic J. Hoberman wrote in *The American Prospect*<sup>11</sup>:

“For the Pentagon no less than the (Black) Panthers, *The Battle of Algiers* is distinguished by its verisimilitude. But if the revolutionaries of the '60s saw historical inevitability, the Pentagon seeks a happier ending: In its remake, Mathieu must be hailed as the casbah's liberator -- and not just by the American media. *The Battle of Algiers* scenario may have been a Black Panther fantasy. For the Bush administration, it is a nightmare, already too real.”

The death of French colonialism gave way to post-colonial imperialism of major global powers, led by the United States. Never was this transference of powers was as much of a reality than the Vietnam War, a colony lost by France in the First Indochina War (1946-1954) that became a United States problem that turned into the Vietnam War conflict (1955-1975). The United States fought in Vietnam War to prevent the further growth of communism in the region but never could adapt in connecting any of their political strategies that could galvanize the South Vietnamese. France already collapsed, as a colonial power in Indochina but the United States did not see this failure as an immediate lesson politically.

An extended cut of *Apocalypse Now* provides a great example of this colonial-imperial divide and transfer of responsibility in a scene where Captain Willard has dinner with a family of French colons who have refused to leave. Willard is naïve to the complexity of their living situation as not French but colons and gets a lot of anger from members of the French family who becomes a human punching bag for their quarrels with how much the Americans have bungled this war. They implore Willard and his country to learn from their mistakes. The family can see the same effects the war has

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<sup>11</sup> Hoberman, J. "Revolution Now (and Then)!" *The American Prospect*. The American Prospect, Inc., 15 Dec. 2003. Web. 07 Oct. 2011. <<http://prospect.org/article/revolution-now-and-then>>.

down to him and his men as what the war did to the French soldiers. The scene in the larger context is about how America did not learn from France. Neither could relate to the growing fervor against 'outsiders' and the rise of communism. The military missions did nothing but bring people closer to the communists and the Viet Cong.

The loss in Vietnam and Algeria was the lack of political legitimacy. France in any of the colonies and territories could no longer defend their system of colonialism in the post-Second World War 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rise of the Viet Cong and the FLN did have popular support because they functioned in multiple societal roles, albeit in many instances imposing their views through violence that grew in legitimacy while the military might of the French and later the United States in Vietnam fell into the trap of losing their legitimacy in their military actions. The Battle of Algiers features a rather jarring scene of the French soldiers walking the streets of the Casbah giving pieces of baguettes to young children. It is an example of the French trying to connect with natives of the Casbah on a human level but in a film where the audience is given images of dead Algerian children carried out of bombed out buildings and torturing people who are quite possibly the relatives of those children in the scene, it shows how the actions of the French undercut these attempts at goodwill.

One major of the major comparisons between Algeria's national liberation terrorism and modern terrorism under international groups like al-Qaeda is the cell structure. In an interview about the film, national security expert Richard Clarke remarked at how disturbing it was seeing the film's depiction of the French trying to crack the cell structure of the FLN.<sup>12</sup> It was disturbing because it mirrored his personal experiences in the Bush White House in trying to cross out murdered or captured

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<sup>12</sup> "The Battle of Algiers: A Case Study", DVD.

members of al-Qaeda on an organizational chart like the chart used by the French in crossing out the cell structure of the FLN.<sup>13</sup> Clarke notes how through the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the rise of fundamentalist international terrorism has led to chapters of al-Qaeda structure to operate in the same but much larger manner as the FLN. The cell structure is so sophisticated that nobody knows anybody. Clarke surmises that al-Qaeda certainly could have watched these film's depictions of the bombing strategies and cell structure. The cell structure in both cases had a revolving door of new faces emerging in the place of crossed out operatives. It may have taken time for an Ali LaPointe or a Saadi Yacef to be replaced but figures emerged. The sophistication of the cell structure not only added to the confusion of the enemy and how members of the cell structure in the course of interrogation can be trained to say little as possible, even in torture.

But what also comes back into mind about the Pentagon screening the film and why it is problematic is the film's portrayal of torture. That it is not about the military work but police work needed in interrogation tactics to get the right information. This means occupying a foreign nation and policing it, which has in certain instances included torturing suspects. The Bush Administration defending torture or rather redefined torture to be known as 'enhanced interrogation tactics'. The criticisms of the film is the assertion made that because of the torture done to get intelligence and information is what led to the French victory in the Battle of Algiers. This is an assertion that has obviously proven false given the proper context of the history of torture during the war. Torture was self-defeating for the French, arguably propelling more and more FLN members up into the hierarchal structure of the terror cell in the way torture and the alleged torture

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<sup>13</sup> "The Battle of Algiers: A Case Study", DVD.

incidents at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay Prison have propelled more membership in al-Qaeda. The United States is defeating itself with its defense of torture.

In many ways the justification of torture by both the French military and the US administration is probably the most on-point analogy between Iraq and Algeria overall. The evidence of coerced interrogation and lack of proof that any tactics of enhanced interrogation worked yet is categorically defended. This despite the effect torture has had on these regions that have served to only create more enemies for these powerful militaries than gain any vital information that they could otherwise get through basic questioning of suspects. This was largely lost on the Bush Administration and the French military.

There are some correlations and lessons for those involved in national security to look at when watching the film but it is looked at as a way to deny the ending of the film. The ending is unsettling and looking at the film from a national security perspective is to look from the French perspective in some ways and not in other instances. To be successful in defeating terrorism is to have what the French lacked, a political reason to be present that is much about winning the hearts and minds with ideas and values to galvanize the people of a region and not fall into the trap set by terrorism.

How Algeria has re-emerged in the public consciousness has not come without reticence, particularly the French public consciousness. Films, many of them French, became a reflection of public opinion that overtime became revitalized memories of both the French and Algerians.

### **III. The Reaction by the French and Algeria Through Film Memory**

One of the major anxieties for the Venice Film Festival in showing *The Battle of Algiers* is the potential diplomatic disaster with the French delegation had for years the festival became one of the most important and influential delegations of the festival. The festival jury ultimately decided that the film was worth the foreseeable trouble the film will have with the French.

As expected, the French delegation at the Venice Film Festival did not take too kindly to *The Battle of Algiers* premiering. A boycott was planned and followed through as none of the French showed up for *The Battle of Algiers* screening and left before the announcement of the Lion prize (despite the fact Bresson's film did get votes from the jury) that would be rewarded to the film. Pontecorvo joked with members of the jury at Venice that the win remain a 'secret'. But in France the film just became that- a secret or ignored news item.

There was no newspaper announcements of the film premiere and win at the Venice Film Festival in France. But much of the repatriated pied-noir community in France knew of the film and sought assurance from the French government that the film did not get any chance of distribution in France. *The Battle of Algiers* was banned from being distributed in France but officially the ban itself only lasted for a little over a year. Many people and much media have confused the length of the ban, as it was mainly a self-employed ban of the film by distributors. The film and its subject matter were seen as too potentially risky for any distributors to dare distribute it. In the few instances it was supposed to be shown, risk followed.

The unofficial public blackballing of the film was the result of many violent incidents of when the film was going to screen. One incidence had fire bombing of a

theater and another had slashed the film screen where *The Battle of Algiers* was supposed to play. Though these instances were few and far between there was always a constant threat made of it happening at a movie house intending to screen the film, usually made by the brutal para-military OAS threatening the movie houses. The role of the group in the France-Algeria conflict made any threat of theirs to be taken seriously. The OAS undoubtedly had a major impact on how few distributors and people saw the film in France.

But there were many cinephiles and filmmakers in France that took an interest in screening and seeing the film. This included French directors and performers. Not until 1971 would there be a conscious attempt made to screen the film, organized by legendary French film director, Louis Malle. The film was screened at a movie house in the Latin Quarter neighborhood of Paris. Malle worked with a democratic student group to get an audience for the screenings.<sup>14</sup> Gradually more screenings happened with little incidence but the film itself would take until 2004 before premiering on French television. Over time, French memory of the war became more culturally aware with following generations taking interest in the colonialist past of their country.

One movie obviously cannot be used to tell the whole history of France's relations with Algeria. *The Battle of Algiers* by itself cannot necessarily fill a void in retelling and restaging the events of the French-Algerian conflict. *The Battle of Algiers* tells a story with multiple perspectives but is still missing several perspectives along with major historical events, settings, figures, and historical context missing.

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<sup>14</sup> Bignardi, Irene. "The Making of *The Battle of Algiers*." *Cineaste*. 25.2 (2000): pp. 14-22. p. 22.

France and Algeria each share the issue of coming to grips with their historical memory. This has led to films being made by both countries that not necessarily provide a counter or contrast to *The Battle of Algiers* but fill in the voids left by the film that make all of these other films companions to it rather than reactionary works. Over time, there have been films of note made by both countries that have re-opened the historical context and varying perspectives through cinema.

Germaine Tillion in 1967 wrote on the French-Algerian War, "We will not speak of the Algerian war for twenty or thirty years. See, we are just starting to take an interest in the Nazi concentration camps. . . . It's a law of history: silence takes hold for a generation."<sup>15</sup> This silence extended from open dialogues to the cinema.

It should be noted that works relating to Algeria got banned or became so heavily scrutinized that the subject conditioned any potential audience to avoid such films by the French government. During the war in Algeria, a state of emergency declared in April 1955 gave the government full control of the press, and "special powers" awarded to the military in March 1956 tightened censorship laws.<sup>16</sup> Direct references to Algeria or commonly referred to in France as 'la guerre sans nom', 'the war without a name', was strictly forbidden.

One film that was banned was Jean-Luc Godard's *Le Petit Soldat* (1960). It deals with the central character named Bruno working for an ultra-right wing French nationalist cell in Switzerland who is in love with a French helper of the FLN named Veronica. What makes the film's ban such an interesting case is that it is an apolitical film, showing

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<sup>15</sup> Reid, p. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Bonner, Virginia. "The New Executioners: The Spectre of Algeria in Alain Resnais's *Night and Fog*." *Scope: An Online Journal of Film & TV Studies*; Department of Culture, Film, and Media, University of Nottingham February 13 (2009). Online.



the warts of both the FLN and the ultra-right French national group. The main character, Bruno, is not a right-wing person; he just joins it to try to connect to something, anything to believe in, but soon gets sucked into the harsh realities of the cause. Bruno gets caught and tortured by the FLN. To prove he is not a double agent to the ultras Bruno agrees to kill an FLN leading operative on behalf of the French to ensure a happy future with Veronica in Brazil. But he commits the act ridden with guilt and then Veronica is soon found out and consequently tortured to death by the French group. The personal rather than the political motivations are what holds Bruno together and what makes his life fall apart in the end. The scenes of torture showcase a banality of evil, little emotion from characters and in the setting of a hotel room, which is much more jarring and frightening as opposed to a visceral depiction of torture.<sup>17</sup> The denunciation of torture for both sides, left and right, Algerian and French, caused the film to be banned until 1963, after the Evian Accords were signed and Godard had established himself as one of the most prominent directors in the world with this film notably being the first collaboration with his then wife and muse Anna Karina.<sup>18</sup>

Despite the apolitical Bruno depicted as a man caught between two worlds, a stand-in for the everyday Frenchmen, the film gets banned by the government showing scenes of torture in a shocking yet honest fashion even when it also shows the FLN, the enemy, commit torture. The film taking such an apolitical stance in showing no good side of the cause caused the film to be heavily ridiculed by leftists and film critics, finding the apolitical stance to be naïve and overly simplistic. So a film banned is in another sense not as revered or championed by critics for not cutting deep enough in

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<sup>17</sup> Hill, Leslie. "Filming Ghosts: French Cinema and the Algerian War." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* Fall 38.3 (1992): pp. 787-804. p. 799 Print.

<sup>18</sup> Hill, p. 795.

condemning the French. Yet *Le Petit Soldat*'s portrayal of torture is well ahead of its time in understanding the banality of it and that it condemns both sides balances the truths of the war. But the war itself though is merely just background noise to the man trying to escape the struggles of his country yet cannot avoid it, a metaphor for the French state of mind.

French films usually dealt with the Algerian conflict in passing or an indirect conflict for the characters. The conflicts usually dealt with male characters impending conscription into fighting for France off-screen in Agnes Varda's *Cleo de 5 à 7* (1962) and Jacques Demy's *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* (1964). Just inferences was considered not enough for French film critic Roger Tailleur, after seeing *Cleo de 5 à 7*, writing, "Poor French cinema, poor little castrated cinema where the screening in the silence of a dark room of a single radio broadcast seems to be uniquely daring and where we . . . fear the presence, in the dark, of a possible censor."<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, many directors took more creative, unorthodox approaches in referring to the conflict under censorship.

Director Alain Resnais, responsible for such reflective World War II film as *Hiroshima, Mon Amour* and Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*, became heavily scrutinized for his work under the censorship rules. *Night and Fog* got targeted for its violent images but the targeting of *Night and Fog* is considered by and large Resnais' indirect criticism of the French collaboration with the Nazis under Vichy that got him in

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<sup>19</sup> Austin, Guy. Representing the Algerian War in Algerian Cinema: Le Vent des Aurès. French Studies: A Quarterly Review, Volume 61, Number 2, April 2007, pp. 182-195. p. 184.

trouble. A five second shot of a French uniform in the concentration camps got removed in order for Resnais to get screened at the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>20</sup>

Despite the threats of censorship Resnais, however, made a film that indirectly dealt with 'la guerre sans noms' with *Muriel ou Le temps d'un retour* in 1963. The audience never sees a Muriel in this film. The title name of Muriel is in fact the name of an Algerian woman who was tortured and killed by one of the more prominent characters in the film while he served in the Algerian war. Initially, Muriel is at first mentioned by the character Bernard to being his fiancée who is ill and therefore cannot meet his friends. The irony in that Muriel is likely not the actual name of this dead woman but she serves the film as a ghost for the characters Bernard and Robert, both served in Algeria and both responsible for her death. Robert is content to putting this episode behind him as a member of the OAS fascists while Bernard has collected many items relating to her death with photos of the ordeal including recreating the event in some form through a movie camera. Bernard wants his memory to be known while Robert wants to forget it. A key exchange between them shows how Robert in many ways serves as a stand-in for the prevailing French opinion at the time, "Do you want to tell the story of Muriel? Muriel is a story that can't be told."<sup>21</sup>

*Muriel* the film shows the contradictions of how 'Muriel', the woman, is becoming ignored and exploited, a metaphor for France during the war period. 'Muriel' the person is not really cared for but rather what is inflicted upon her serving as Bernard's drive in revisiting his memories of the war and ignored by Robert who finds her as just part of the past that is too tough to revisit. She is not a part of Algeria, but serves as a

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<sup>20</sup> Bonner.

<sup>21</sup> Hill, p. 794.

memory, a ghost. There is never access or context given to the viewer of this woman and what she did to be a captive. She functions as a referent to a personal haunting that has no voice or presence beyond being referenced through the characters of the film.

Another metaphor for the film is that it is too hard for Bernard to deal with the past, in some ways also serving as a stand-in for French memory. He kills Robert, blaming him for the death of Muriel and indirectly his guilt after he listens to a tape that may or may not be related to Muriel's death. Bernard's personal archives are destroyed in an explosion at his workshop, likely revenge taken by the OAS for Robert's death, leaving him with no trail of the incident beyond his guilty conscience. Bernard can no longer exorcise Muriel. He can only resist her in his mind. For years this became the attitude of the French, resist the memory of Algeria and the Algerian. Conveniently, France did not have to face anything or anyone who took form of Algeria or the Algerian memory.

Resnais made a film that served as a reflection of the period, a country and a people unable to grapple with their recent past but a film that needed to be made in order to make viewers aware of the period's complications by deliberating through a style and tone that estranges the viewer in a way that follows how a French viewer sees the film. Cuts in the film are abrupt and intentionally break from narrative in conveying to the audience the psychological toll memory has on the characters, particularly the inescapable memory of war. The film earned critical disdain by French critics who found the style too unsettling and raw by its fractured structure that in many ways, however indirectly, was the only way Resnais was able to comment on the Algerian conflict.

Over time, many more films were made offering several reflections and perspectives. One of the more unique cases was Brigitte Rouan's *Overseas* (1990). Rouan's film is autobiographical, reflecting on her childhood in a Naval family that lived in Algeria and how ultimately only one of the three surviving sisters goes to France with nothing. The film largely functions to show the pied-noirs who are caught in the middle. We see them segregated from any of the war activity until it comes to their doorstep. They are not a family who wants reconciliation as much as they want to be able to stay in Algeria but grow frustrated, as illustrated in a scene that has the family patriarch yelling back at the radio broadcasting a speech by Charles de Gaulle. The film is told from multiple perspectives that recall Kurosawa's *Rashomon* effect, an elliptical style that melds the more whimsical memories of one sister to the more realistic memories of another sister. At times nostalgic and other times tragic, the film operates with awareness on the contradictions, complications, and mixed feelings of the life of a pied-noir, based mostly on the fact the film was written and directed by a pied-noir.

Austrian director Michael Haneke's *Cache* (2005) offers something to the idea of how memory comes to face the oppressor in a mysterious, unorthodox way. In this case, the oppressor was a little boy, as was the victim. *Cache* also serves as a metaphor for French memory of the war of the past and current context. The film is practically mechanized in plot to serve the purpose of the metaphor for the French-Algerian conflict. At first, the film appears to be a voyeuristic tale of surveillance and meddling into the lives of a bourgeois French family who receive the tapes from somebody filming the exterior of their home. The film begins with an extreme-long shot sent to the couple. Much like *Muriel*, *Cache* takes the oblique approach in not immediately telling the

audience what is being referenced and what it has to do with the plot. The difference of course beyond the issues of censorship is that Haneke through the passage of time is more explicit in its recollection of events through images of the past being shown to the audience for clues than pushing the audience to use its imagination. For *Cache* it is a matter of connecting the images in search of the actions of their characters and the contradictions it yields.

Family patriarch Georges Laurent, a television host of a show about contemporary literature, is revealed to have a past with the tapes leading him to the modest apartment of Majid whose parents worked for his parents until their deaths as a part of the pro-FLN protests in Paris in 1961, known as the Paris Massacre. Majid was supposed to be adopted by Georges' parents until Georges told his parents about an incident that gets Majid taken away to an orphanage. In reality, Georges tricked Majid into cutting off the head of a rooster, a story that Georges used against Majid as disturbing behavior. When faced by these accusations, Georges denies it or remembers no such event happening.

*Cache* deals with not just the suppression of memories and also the manipulation of reality. Young Georges uses the reality of Majid following his wishes and turns it against him, killing a rooster and drinking its blood, to get what he wants in maintaining his superiority over Majid with this revelation sabotaging the adoption plans. In his current occupation, Georges enjoys a lot of control over his TV show manipulating the broadcast with editing tricks. Georges loves being in front of the camera but the real joy from his work is behind the camera. The surveillance camera suddenly takes on a side of Georges facing his past and having it created through an instrument that has given him power and wealth turned against him. It threatens Georges' saturated, self-composed

persona that no longer has his gaze but the gaze of an unknown person, though it is easily speculated who are possibly behind the tapes.

The more the tapes come back, some of which include disturbing sketches, memory starts to trigger for Georges of Majid, part reality and part imagination, and the farmhouse he grew up in. Georges returns to the farmhouse that triggers more images of memory and goes to the apartment that turns out to be Majid's apartment until the final tape is Majid, who had since killed himself in front of Georges, breaking down in his apartment after Georges pushes to the conclusion that he is responsible for the tapes. It sounds ridiculous that a child's actions led to another life getting ruined but the tapes make Georges responsible for his actions. Yet the tape serves as an indicting reminder, like *Muriel*, that cannot be effectively destroyed as it tapes into Georges' conscience, leading him to break down.

Whoever is responsible for the tapes in reminding Georges of his past serves as a metaphor for French memory being reminded of Algeria that took form not immediately but years after. The film is consciously repetitious in showing the tapes of surveillance in real time that gradually take a meaning of shaming Georges in his classist and racist past. Until being confronted with the tapes, it appeared that Georges had successfully suppressed his memories. *Cache* serves an indictment on French anxiety in the decolonizing period, portraying a banality of evil in showing a child's perspective in being fearful of a child who is 'other' to go as far as telling a lie. *Cache* is a complicated film that is not obvious on the outset of what it is about but is a powerful portrayal of repressed amnesia to the past that was self-inflicted by the French population.

Algerian films after *The Battle of Algiers* dealing with the war could not avoid the immediate comparisons to the film. It seemed no film since has consciously ever following the disciplined, realistic documentary-style of Pontecorvo but there of course was an Algerian story that needed to be told by Algerians.

A major film of note is the Algerian production, *Outside the Law* directed by Rachid Bouchareb, a French director of Algerian descent who was a child during the war. Bouchareb had previously made a film, *Days of Glory*, about the role of Algerians in the fight during World War II that had been long ignored by the French. It appeared natural step in telling more about the Algerian history that Bouchareb move on to the story of the French-Algerian War. Bouchareb said that *Days of Glory* was in fact the first chapter of a larger story, "I want to make a second part that takes us up to the Algerian war...".<sup>22</sup> *Outside the Law* became that film.

The story that portrays a family and three fictional brothers makes a lot of historical events major back-drops and plot points, such as V-E Day correlating with the Setif Massacre at the very beginning of the film and more importantly the Café Wars coming to France. Portraying the struggles of power between the MNA and the FLN portrays a nation that is far more divided and hostile to each other, with more scenes of inter-group violence than conflict with the French. The film suffers with artistic license on some of the history, such as theorizing what set off the Setif Massacre, but it is film that serves its purpose of telling the multiple, inter-connecting perspectives of the three brothers of this Algerian family.

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<sup>22</sup> Jafaar, Ali. "Unknown Soldiers: Days Of Glory." *Sight & Sound*. British Film Institute, Apr. 2007. Web. 06 Feb. 2012. <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/feature/49364>>.



Portrayal of Algeria in film initially had Algeria itself and its people out of sight in early French films on the subject has gradually grown into seeing fleshed-out French and Algerian memory from both sides of the war, showing both the glory and the tragedy, by these two countries and their film industries. When *The Battle of Algiers* came out it broke ground in directly telling the story of the conflict. Over time, new perspectives and new ground has been covered about the war that provides a more complete look at war, colonialism, and decolonization.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

*The Battle of Algiers* is the most well known film on the conflict for good reason. Though the film's historical simplifications and omissions of perspectives are problematic, it has served as an interesting study in its depictions of terrorism and counter-terrorism over time that once highlighted by the most radical groups in the world are now intensely looked at by experts in national security who see some unsettling but important patterns of what to do and what not to do in fighting terrorism around the world.

More films about the conflict have come out before and since with fascinating perspectives of history, politics, and ethics that surrounded the war, but none of which quite are used and scrutinized like *The Battle of Algiers*. Mainly because its documentary-like approach of depicting the film, through "The Dictatorship of Truth", does give off an illusion to reality in its details and depictions of terrorism and counter-terrorism. The film is urgent because in certain instances the film has become a mirror image of the present though with distinct differences.

## ***Chapter 5 Conclusion***

There are two types of political films. There are political films that entertain us, often broadly define the issues within the film and often of the times, subsequently fading into public memory. Then there are the political films that are unforgettable. *The Battle of Algiers* is in the latter category that through my research has become more definable and identifiable in what makes a political film unforgettable. “The Dictatorship of Truth” employed by Gillo Pontecorvo for stylistic effect and the ideological drive behind and in front of the camera makes *The Battle of Algiers* unforgettable and among the great political films of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

When watching the film, its style and ideology melded together is what makes the film so remarkable and instantly recognizable. What makes the film long lasting as it has or at least has given it new life is how the film is looked at in a post-colonial perspective that has colonialism give way to imperialism of nation-states and corporations. Through research going back to the earliest political films, I have learned that *The Battle of Algiers* share numerous characteristics in showing reality as depicted of the time, capturing the moment, and a dialectical approach to storytelling in addition to the guerrilla filmmaking discipline known as “The Dictatorship of Truth”. So how *The Battle of Algiers* in its ideology and drive remained palpable compared to those early political films?

It is important to look at how *The Battle of Algiers* relates to some of the earliest political films. The earliest political films largely went against the conventions of narrative filmmaking at the time. Dziga Vertov’s film *Man with the Movie Camera* featured capturing on camera real people in everyday life, a documentary with the camera as the eye, a Kino-Eye that deciphered the world through a Marxist perspective that was

meant to serve as a tool for political or social change. However, his film befuddled a lot of the officials in the Soviet government finding his depiction of real-life *strange*. Many early films documented the everyday life, but in real-time with static footage rather than Vertov's avant-garde depictions of everyday life in the future that features everyday people. It is true that Vertov's depictions of the everyday was avant-garde and experimental in style, but it was also a highly poetic depiction of art that blended with the real and the political in championing the Soviet ideals for a better future.

Sergei Eisenstein's political films also were poetic in depicting art, though not as grounded in reality, in showing the everyday life, and far more explicit in its politics. Eisenstein's films consisted of a heavy theatricality of images clashing and ultimately forming synthesis demonstrating a contextual Kuleshov effect, an intellectual montage, where the images together yield a parallel meaning formed together with the juxtaposing images.<sup>1</sup> The parallel meaning shared in the thesis and the antithesis often showed clashing worlds of the proletariat against the bourgeoisie in his film *October* or how the struggle inflicted on the working proletariat runs parallel to the images of cattle being broken down and slaughtered like in Eisenstein's film *Strike*.<sup>2</sup> The ideology in Eisenstein's films can be found in these juxtaposed images where the struggle of workers and historical moments in Soviet history are re-enacted. The theory by Friedrich Hegel in the dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and the resulting synthesis became film form under Eisenstein became famous in his theory of montage in film form. Class conflict that

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<sup>1</sup> Kizirian, Shari. "October: The End of a Revolution." *Cinematheque Annotations on Film 58* (2011). *Senses of Cinema*. Senses of Cinema, Inc., 13 Mar. 2011. Web. 30 Sept. 2011. <<http://www.sensesofcinema.com/2011/cteq/october-the-end-of-a-revolution/>>.

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, Dan. "Sergei Eisenstein." *Great Directors 30* (2004.) *Senses of Cinema*. Senses of Cinema, Inc., 12 Feb. 2004. Web. 1 Oct. 2011.

drove history became the clash of the thesis and antithesis with the victor being the worker or the representative of the workers, the U.S.S.R, achieving the synthesis of Hegelian dialectic in Eisenstein's films.

The film form of both Eisenstein and Vertov are still vibrant in the teaching of cinema despite ideology each shared in the communist, Soviet belief system fading into the past. Their works in having a form in their images and substance in their ideology to their works that had a poeticism that stands out as some of the greatest political films. Capturing the social and political moment in film did become much more grounded in reality, however. Directors across Europe in the post-World War II period, particularly in Italy with the rise of the Neo-Realists, changed the status quo of how everyday life became depicted in film that had a social and political conscience.

The Italian Neo-Realists while having varying ideologies and politics each shared the frame of mind that making films after the war cannot be escapist entertainment or reconvene to the status quo when the status quo, fascism, was shattered. In rebuilding Italian cinema, the Neo-Realists showed a more bare-boned, genuine, truthful, and realistic kind of cinema. There was not so much a style in neo-realism but the movement took on the noted features of having non-professional actors, shooting on-location rather than a studio, and films with plots that served as a social commentary on the everyday life in post-War Italy that often showed families and individuals in poverty. Their stories that often got ignored in Italy cinema began to get made. Formally, many of the films did get made in black and white, in a very grainy quality under the low budget production costs. These films that used real people also touched upon something important, particularly in representing the post-war period, in that it was more than acting in the

moment- it became about re-living the moment of their life experiences captured on camera. Italian Neo-Realism struck the global film public and it struck several filmmakers, aspiring filmmakers, and managed to convert people into filmmakers- Gillo Pontecorvo among those people inspired.

Many students, the second generation, of the Neo-Realist movement grew as filmmakers working with Neo-Realism but many ultimately grew out of it and chose more poetic, avant-garde, and existential projects that became the new faces of the new generation of Italian cinema (Fellini, Bertolucci, Pasoloni). Pontecorvo, although initially making documentaries, went the opposite way in career trajectory than his peers with his films becoming more grounded in reality with the social and political stakes rising in his first three films.

Pontecorvo was drawn to the works of Roberto Rossellini and in a way their trajectories followed a similar path. Rossellini expanded his War Trilogy from the story of an Italian city (*Rome: Open City*) to a story of his native Italy (*Paisan*) to all of post-war Europe (*Germany: Year Zero*). Pontecorvo expanded his storytelling from making a movie about Italy (*The Wide Blue Road*) to a film about the ethical dilemmas of the Holocaust in Europe (*Kapo*) to ultimately a story about the Algerian revolt from colonial France in North Africa with *The Battle of Algiers*. All of these films dealt with the current moment or the not so distant past but what lingered with *The Battle of Algiers* was the anti-colonialist revolt that swept across the Third World leading to the fall of Western colonial empires. Pontecorvo's own leftist ideology and his past in fighting in the Italian anti-fascist resistance against Mussolini's fascism empathized with the anti-colonial cause and the oppression faced by the Algerian people. For Pontecorvo the struggle in

resistance was a universal concept be it in Italy, Vietnam, France, or Algeria. What made the Algerian story so appealing, however, was that it existed being not as a colony but an intricate part of France for over 120 years until an organized resistance gained results and activated the public consciousness. Algeria also had a sizable white European population that lived in Algeria for decades, pied-noirs whose lives only made the oppression of the native Algerians all the more explicit and their struggle all the more sound.

Pontecorvo and his screenwriting collaborator Franco Solinas immersed themselves in the Algerian story, a historical event that could be told in the dialectic. Their politics are aligned with their thesis, the Algerians, versus the anti-thesis, colonialism by and large upheld by the French military, that collided and clashed ending with the Algerians prevailing over colonialism. The story on film, of course, contained a certain level of truth. But this film was not about a pair of Italian filmmakers telling an Algerian story in their perspective but this was an Algerian story that planned on recapturing the moment of decolonization and revolt.

“The Dictatorship of Truth” pushed by Pontecorvo aimed to give the audience as much of an illusion to reality that parts of the film could get mistaken as documentary footage or newsreel footage. The notorious disclaimer that played for American audiences noted that not one-foot of the film used documentary footage suddenly places in the audience mind of how such footage could get mistaken as real. Aesthetically, grainy documentary-like stock footage succeeds, particularly in the crowd scenes that run the emotional gamut of solemnity, chaos, and euphoria.

The film’s script used Saadi Yacef’s memoirs as a template but it was the access that Yacef provided through his status gained during the war that the film benefitted most

from. Real locations and real people, not professional actors, used during the making of the film shot on location in the Casbah to retell the events. If there were buildings that had been blown up during the war they were rebuilt and blown up again.

The film had no single protagonist or antagonist in the film, although Ali LaPointe received considerable focus in the film. Like Eisenstein and Rossellini there was no central protagonist to have the audience identify with but rather a group of people. Pontecorvo created an ensemble that served to be collective protagonist, a united force against the French, with the antagonist being colonialism itself. What was largely seen from this huge ensemble cannot be considered acting but closer to reliving the events of the past re-captured on-screen. We never see the ideological conversion of the collection of people supporting the revolution and the FLN in *The Battle of Algiers*, but the raw energy on-screen is palpable.

In the form and style of the movement of Italian Neo-Realism, most notably Rossellini, *The Battle of Algiers* is highlighting the social and political struggles of the period and capturing the political moment realistically and philosophically. The film does not just document the terror and counter-terror campaigns of the Algerian FLN and the French military but derives from the philosophies of Frantz Fanon. Terrorism executed by the FLN is portrayed as born out of the oppression they face under colonial rule by the French. Pontecorvo and Solinas have undeniable solidarity to the Algerian side but they do not make the French or the pied-noir repulsive to the audience. The characterization of the pied-noir who are anonymous and the French military led by a logical, tactical military man in Colonel Mathieu. The fact these groups of people are not dehumanized into caricatures in the fashion that Eisenstein made the bourgeoisie in his

films as villains is probably the biggest difference *The Battle of Algiers* has with Eisenstein's films.

The film while being realistic and guerrilla-like in filmmaking quality still contains a certain amount of drama and artifice that makes it remain cinematic. There are shots and cues given that frame the narrative that while colonization is terrible, it is destructive in numerous ways to both the Algerians and the pied-noirs. When the Algerians and pied-noirs both die in bombings by the FLN and the French, Ennio Morricone and Gillo Pontecorvo's musical score of the baroque organ plays for both losses of life, conveying that their losses are equal. Then there are the lingering camera shots from the female helper's point of view looking at the happy group as she places the bomb in the milk bar. When the bomb is ticking, the dramatic irony of the audience knowing the bomb is placed in occupied pied-noir commercial centers, there are several cuts of people there at the milk bar, including a shot of a boy eating ice cream. Only seconds later we see the place explode. We see these people and with very little context provided about each character yet in the aftermath of the explosion the audience are supposed to be moved into sympathizing with their deaths with the music but at the same time understand why this endless cycle of violence continues to happen. The French are defending a dying system of colonialism but that system is what springs violence in uprising against it, the film makes the reasoning easy but the choices in the way violence is carried out is portrayed as tragedies. The film cannot succeed as a triumph when it does not show the tragedies and tough choices made, though these dilemmas are faced mostly by the FLN. In certain respects it is because it is indiscriminate terrorism that does need to be defended more than defending a dying system of colonialism.



*The Battle of Algiers*, while filled with great details, lacks a greater context and truth. Further researching the real Battle of Algiers and the French-Algerian War proved to show that while “The Dictatorship of Truth” is an impressive discipline to wield, *The Battle of Algiers* as a tale entirely based on the whole story about Algeria, the war, or the actual Battle of Algiers proved not to be the case. The film simplifies a lot of the most complicated aspects of the war such as the inter-group acts of violence between the FLN and other existing groups of the period.

Presenting the Algeria or Algiers as beholden to the choice of between either following the FLN or continue to live under France with no other visible presence or alternative made it appear that it was just those two choices. That was not the case. There existed other groups who frequently clashed with the FLN that carried over from Algeria into France creating what was known as the café wars. Within Algiers there was arguably more inter-group violence and clashes than with the French military. The aims of these groups, either living in a free Algeria versus living together as equals with the pied-noir and French caused conflict, back stabbing, and distrust among the groups. The inter-group violence violence arguably is what led to the Algerian defeat in Algiers where police reports made by each group implicated other members of other groups, many of whom jailed and never seen again.

What arguably does most harm to the film is that it arguably produces a false image of the war- a lie. The scenes of torture show torture as an awful act that under colonialism make ordinary people capable of terrible infliction against others. All of the methods that were in vogue at the time are featured in *The Battle of Algiers* such as electric torture and water torture. But the results that torture yields in the film shows that

it is an effective tool with Ali LaPointe being found out and ultimately killed in a bombing because the French tortured a man to find his whereabouts. In truth, the French thanks to Algerian inter-group friction and violence in addition to the compressed area of the Casbah made it easy for the French able to find out vital information and intelligence than torture. In a bizarre instance there are veterans of the French military, who have defended the use of torture during the war, that champion *The Battle of Algiers* because of how torture is depicted as a means to getting vital information successfully.

The choices by Pontecorvo and Solinas for simplifying a lot of the history of the war and washing away the blood soaked past of the FLN is to maintain the film's ideology. People are not implicated but rather the inefficient, oppressive system as colonialism is really the true enemy of the film. The pied-noir are not really portrayed beyond being caught in the struggle and the French military are defending colonialism but are conditioned to follow tasks such as torture as an order. It is not even so much as France as the villain but colonialism in this film is portrayed as the cause of the war and the vicious and violent back and forth between the FLN and France. Even in showing the ethical dilemmas and tough choices the film ignores, and likely due to shooting the film on location in Algiers that was then under the one-party FLN government, that the war was not just about defeating France but fighting for Algeria's future. The FLN ultimately won in both instances. But it cannot be neglected that this historical truth is swept under by the film in order to give off this greater sense of unity against the colonialism.

The film was released with controversy, causing a stir at the Venice Film Festival with the French delegation leaving in protest, critics across the world appalled and riveted at the depiction of terrorism, and most notably, banned in France. Exploring France at

their decolonization moment in film was no easy task for any director let alone a French director. Even films that indirectly referenced the war and showed no direct images got scrutinized. Even films that in no way could be seen as sympathetic to the FLN or the rebels got banned by the French censors and scorned by critics. When *The Battle of Algiers* finally got shown in France in the 1970s, films later did come out showing the different perspectives that filled the void not yet covered by *The Battle of Algiers* or other films. Algeria itself has made films about the war and has now covered the dark history of war. But *The Battle of Algiers* remains the most landmark, the most memorable and the most urgent of any film about the war in part in its closeness to reality and the moment.

The film's legacy has evolved from a favorite film about leftist groups, a source of inspiration and instruction. Various assumptions can be made about how radical groups like the Black Panthers saw the world at a boiling point with empires falling and seeing the opportunity that super powers will fall not long after. Just as vital as the writings of Fanon, the film was seen as a how-to manual in planting terror attacks and how violent actions that included terrorism was endemic to oppression. Of course, nothing in the First World has fallen because of *The Battle of Algiers*. The key difference being the struggle of Algerians and the Third World in colonialism was a type of oppression that could never been felt or fully understood on the same level by the rest of the First World. When the FLN commits indiscriminate acts of terror it does galvanize and embolden the public into reflecting on their oppression under the French. There are no instances in the First World where the general public is galvanized by the indiscriminate acts of terror by radical groups. It was a fringe political statement through

violence and not a statement that unites people politically. The Third World decolonization was a part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that many thought aged *The Battle of Algiers* and its Marxist ideology. But what has extended the film's life in the public conscience is that it has become a film about learning lessons of terrorism and counter-terrorism.

The flyer posted for the 2003 screening had the Pentagon lend itself to being in a similar situation to the French military in the war. What has replaced colonialism is post-colonial imperialism. The United States' military occupation of Iraq is the implicated imperial power. Losing the war of ideas as shown in the film is the outdated system of colonialism through the endless violence further and further pushes Algerians to support resistance to the French. Today the film is seen through how terrorism works, although terrorism in the film is seen as national liberation versus the more contemporary fundamentalist-driven terrorism, and what mistakes did the French make in its counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency.

What can the US learn in how imperialism begets violence that possibly pushes any native Iraqi into siding with the most militant, anti-US groups? Finding the political solution that incorporates the people of the country rather than exerting military might and tactical supremacy is one prominent example. Is it to stop torturing? Well, the film is problematic in that sense. What can be learned is that winning a war goes beyond immeasurably defeated the enemy in military might but just as much about engaging with the people instead of bombing them. The Iraq connection to Algeria has grown in years following but what conversations got sparked in the screening at the Pentagon remains a mystery.

The biggest question about *The Battle of Algiers* is whether or not it remains a film in which its urgency can still remain prescient. How it has remained so prescient is its relationship to the present in re-creating irregular warfare, terrorism, counter-terrorism, and counter-insurgency. Terrorism has been around and will always remain around but the threat to the West in the greater context of history has been only recent. It seems as long as the United States or a major Western power continue to stubbornly operate on their military might and military-based solutions the film's prescience shall continue. The French have slowly come to grips with their past and memories of the period are more varied in perspective and this arguably has made that country from its generation of conscripts and after aware of the consequences of losing in the battle of ideas and values. Until the battle of ideas and values are prioritized first and are legitimately incorporated and present in whatever foreign region, the global powers shall continue to lose their legitimacy in those regions and terrorism likely gaining legitimacy.

*The Battle of Algiers* exceeds in recreating the reality to the effect that there are scenes that can easily be mistaken for a documentary. Its ideology in how oppression can set off an endless battle in violence between the oppressed and the oppressors has managed to live on as a fierce dialectical film containing nuance and balance, despite Pontecorvo and Solinas' shared derision toward colonialism. The film's documentary style recaptures the moment of the period in great detail. Combining the dialectic approach to history supported by Eisenstein with the neo-realist aesthetics and form of Rossellini, *The Battle of Algiers* is a film that has electricity to it unlike any other political film since *Battleship Potemkin*. What separates it from *Battleship Potemkin*, however, is its even-handedness and guerrilla style. The lessons of terrorism and

counter-terrorism remain relevant today as it did during the real Battle of Algiers. What gives this film its most noted identity is that the people shown in this film are not acting it, but having lived through it are re-creating the moment. Recapturing the moment and spirit of revolt with those non-professional actors transcends the ideology the film just as it transcended acting. That is what has made *The Battle of Algiers* still vibrant and influential today.

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